THE NEW

ADVENTURES

ETERNITY WEEPS

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Author's Note

For Colin Booth Mortimore

When I was a kid I used to write stories. Doctor Who stories. I used to type them up painstakingly on an old Smith-Corona manual and draw a little felt pen cover for them and show them to Dad, who would duly read them and comment on them for me. One day he read this dumb pile of crap I'd written about monsters and the end of the world and all the rest of it and he said, 'Why don't you do Doctor Who like

Charles Dickens?'

I didn't have a clue what he meant. But I recognized that Dickens wasn't a name to be bandied about lightly. He was classical, but popular. He was serious, but humorous. Grown up, but childish. An astute observer of what we have come to :call the human condition.

I never did write a Doctor Who book like Charles Dickens. But I did write others you may have read. And Cracker. And Babylon 5. And hopefully, eventually, I'll write more original stuff.

Dad died just after Christmas 1995, a few weeks before this book was commissioned. Eternity Weeps will be the first book he won't be giving me his own particularly dry brand of feedback on.

So.

If any of you have read anything else I've written, and if you've liked it, then June, Jonathan, Joanne and myself will be very grateful if you would give a moment of your time, in silence, in respect of the man whose words gave birth to the words you have enjoyed so much.

Thanks.

Jim Mortimore, Bristol, June 1996

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From the journal of Professor Bernice Summerfield-Kane, April 2003

Exploding suns, molten sand, sulphuric acid seas; soldiers, senseless violence, civilian casualties; singularities and sheep. Blimey - what a holiday.

If you're lucky it's all over by now. If you're lucky you won't have been living in Delhi or Bangladesh or Mombasa; you won't have been crushed by crowds trying to escape the quakes. If you're lucky you won't have been in Turkey, where the first nukes detonated, or on the moonbase when the singularities broke free. If you're lucky you won't be dying of napalm burns or alien biomatter infection or X-ray fallout; wondering if your children will be deformed or stillborn, or what diseases they might die of if they live beyond the next few years, or if they do live whether they'll be strictly human any more. If you're lucky you'll be rich enough to build a wall around your home to keep

a few square metres free of the four hundred million homeless Third World immigrants; to have a direct mail drop for medical supplies so you can avoid the plagues sweeping the globe from the hundred million dead bodies littering the plains of India, Africa and Asia; to have a solar power source for your household atmosphere filters so the remaining biomatter won't reach you.

If you're really lucky you're already dead.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. And although I've never particularly been one to subscribe to convention, I suppose if this is to make any sense at all I'll have to start at the beginning. Not the beginning of my story, or of Jason's or Chris's. Even the Doctor came late to the page, as it were. No.

The real story starts on a planet orbiting the star 16 Alpha Leonis, six billion years ago.

That's about one decade for every death, in case you're counting.

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Prologue

16 Alpha Leonis One, six billion years ago

16 Alpha Leonis One is not exactly what you might call honeymoon potential. It's a bit like Venus. Not the Venus of Burroughs or Bradbury. The real Venus. The Venus where they used to remember things by eating each other's brains. The Venus where the sky consists principally of carbon dioxide and the seas are boiling sulphuric acid, and what little solid ground you might find is really nothing more than the peaks of a chain of highly active volcanoes girdling the planet's equator.

Ah ha, I hear you thinking. Life here sounds like a rough ride. Well maybe you're right. Any species capable of evolving intelligence and basic technology in such a volatile environment is one I wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley at midnight. Then again, if I did meet a member of this particular species in a dark alley at midnight the chances are it would be as dead as you or I would be if caught unprotected on its world. That would be a shame because, despite looking like three-metre-wide, crystal-armoured sea anemones, the Cthalctose are really rather a civilized species.

It's true. Their culture is fairly well developed - philosophically about the level of the ancient Greeks. The Cthalctose have reasoning minds, a knowledge of principles such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, even astronomy (they do it by feeling tidal movement in the sulphuric acid seas).

But like the ancient Greeks they are playing with the ideas as intellectual amusements. Their level of practical technology doesn't even encompass something as sophisticated as a steam engine. It's a shame really. If they'd had the steam engine they might have made it in evolutionary terms. Well, made it without all the damnable fuss and bother I've just been through, that is.

The Cthalctose live in buildings shaped like coral reefs. They 'bury' their dead by leaving them on the projecting atolls to decompose in the acidic atmosphere. The dead bodies thus form a steady rain of food for the young, which are born attached to the sides of the reefs.

On this particular day, some six billion years ago, the Astronomer Royal lazed in the deepest trench of the deepest ocean and watched the sky.

Well, he didn't think of it as the sky as such, not having eyes. But he knew it was there. He could feel it move tides of sulphuric acid around his three-hundred-metre-long tentacles. A land-based species; one possessing eyes, might have thought the sky an empty mess of murky clouds. Not the Astronomer Royal. To him the sky was as full as the oceans with movement and life. Masses which moved in intricate patterns, with rhythms which added and subtracted to shape the seas around him; a vast design, of which small parts might be reiterated once or twice in an average lifespan.

He could feel the movement of the sun and the moon though he would never know their light or warmth. They were quite close and moved relatively quickly. Further away were the two large gas giants which acted as shepherd moons to a ring of stellar dust about six times their combined mass. He could feel the distant tug of a third, even larger gas giant beyond that, and then the delicate ripples of the Oort cloud right at the very edge of the Solar System.

The Astronomer Royal was very good at observing the sky. He had spent the last three hundred years planning a performance of his observations to the rest of his species. Performance art wasn't a new thing to the Cthalctose, but when you spend half your life fixed to a large reef and the rest dodging predators there were really only a limited number of things about which you could perform. The Astronomer Royal was going to change all that. He wanted to put on the best show in the history of Art. No more romances or mythic battles for him. His performance would encompass the sky itself. Three centuries of it to be precise. Each of his hundreds of tentacles would move in precise patterns which would duplicate the patterns of the masses in the sky. He'd have to speed the performance up a bit of course: performed in real time it was likely to become boring, and some of the older citizens might even die before it was finished. But even so it would be a thing of beauty and intellect. A thing never before seen on his world.

The Astronomer Royal was nothing if not an Artist.

If he hadn't been the Earth would have been a very different place.

Breathing sulphuric acid and straining from it the edible remains of the recently dead, the Astronomer Royal waited and watched as the, sky moved around him. He was waiting for a particular mass - one he had been watching for nearly a hundred years. He concentrated on the tides produced by this Other. The Astronomer Royal observed the tides for many hours as he fed and breathed and allowed himself to be

cleaned by the corrosive action of the sea.

He watched the Other and he thought hard about it. The Other was new to the Solar System. It hadn't always been there. It had appeared nearly a century ago at the very edge of the Oort cloud and had stayed there for a long time. Then, about fifty years ago, the tides produced by the Other had begun to increase in strength. Either it was increasing in mass or it was moving closer.

Perhaps it could be the focal point of his performance.

He wondered which of the two theories was correct. Was it getting heavier, or moving closer? That night's observations brought the beginning of an answer. In fact, both theories were correct.. The Other was perceptibly heavier since the last observation. And its place in the pattern of the sky had changed.

It was moving closer.

The Astronomer Royal spent three months observing the new change, wondering how he would incorporate it into his performance of the sky.

When he finally worked out its significance he almost died of fright.

If he had died life on Earth would have been very different. If there had ever been any human life, that is.

***

Chapter 1

We were in Dogubayazit looking for the Ark of Ages when the Flood came.

Why? It was just one of those days, that's all.

Marriage is weird. You spend half your life wondering about it and the other half wondering what the hell it was you were wondering about. The order of the day is confusion, insecurity, dependency. Trapped somewhere in the middle of this emotional slushpile is the thing that drove you to it in the first place: that corky of Devil called Love.

Marriage to Jason Kane is all the above, squared and cubed. Sometimes it's worse. On really bad days it's almost good. These days sneak up on you. They lull you into a false sense of security. On days like these you know what he thinks about you. You know what he feels about you and wants from you. You even have a reasonably good idea what you want from him.

Then he eyes up some bit of totty in the Eiffel Tower gift shop and it all turns to doggie poo and you don't know why, and you spend all night trying to make it up but he's too guilty to get it up, and you he awake till morning and tell him you've had enough emotional bullshit for one honeymoon and you're off to Turkey to find Noah's Ark or drown trying, and would he seriously consider staying the hell out of your life for the conceivable future and as much longer as he can manage?

It's as much as you can do not to chuck the ring at him as you go.

No, not that one, stupid. The wedding ring. And he had to pay the hotel bill too. Ha ha.

Turkey was exactly the opposite of what I expected. As a historian, archaeologist and sometime adventurer I really ought to know better by now. I expected beautiful mountain views, clear skies, adventure, possibly a handsome stranger or two to ease my husband-shattered ego.

What I got was a nasty little border war, a nasty little rash, a mountain of sheepshit, and an apparently endless supply of warm Pepsis.

And that was before I even unpacked my trowel.

My ride landed at three o'clock local time. There hadn't been any commercial flights because of the war (the last having been shot down by a malfunctioning Scud) so, I hired a crusty Norwegian pilot named Sven (no last name given) to fly me to where the action was in a mothballed Russian Army chopper which was at least ninety years older than God (and a couple of years younger than Sven, at that).

The flight cost me eighteen hundred for Sven, another nine for the chopper, six hundred for fuel and six hundred and fifty for repairs to the tail rotor bearings before I'd let the bugger take off. I charged the lot to Jason's card.

Not that he'd ever notice - the Doctor had left us with a mountain of plastic -

but it made me feel better.

Oh yes, there was the fifty I bunged Sven to keep his hands off me and on the joystick where they belonged during the flight.

An even forty grand to get me from Jason Kane to just five kilometres south of the most famous mountain in the world. It seemed a lot of money and it was. Then again everyone has their little problems. The Captain of the Titanic had his iceberg. Noah had Ararat.

Now I had Ararat too.

I was rubbing my hands as I stepped down from the chopper. Only half of it was due to the cold. The other half was due to relief at having survived the flight. The third half was glee: I was alone. No tourists. No French totty. No Jason. Just Ararat. Seventeen thousand feet, two peaks, snow, rock, one large boat. All to myself.

I should be so lucky. Me and a Chartreuse Microbus full of Jesus freaks, a shipping engineer who should by rights have been trying to salvage the aforementioned Titanic, an astronaut with a dose of religion so bad I've been taking preventative medication, and half the Iraqi army.

I'll tell you all about them in a bit.

Sven grinned a mouthful of crusty teeth at me and said something that sounded like, 'It vos immense pleasure by Gott to heff you in my aircraft, yes, Miss Professor? Ve do lunch sometime ya, by Gott?

I smiled in confusion, waved, shouldered my rucksack, turned towards

the village.

The chopper had set down in a field of pumice and sheepshit. My original snakeskin Liz Lewitt pumps were knackered before I'd got three yards.

Ditto my shoulders where the rucksack straps had rubbed through my Soochi blouse. And my lungs were raw from fuel fumes and threats screamed at Sven when he'd tried it on in the chopper.

See what easy living will do for you?

The chopper lifted, hung for a moment at head height spraying me with dirt and powdered sheepshit as Sven waved from the cockpit, coughed black smoke from the engine cowling, banked and roared away. After a few seconds it lifted enough to clear the adobe wall at the south edge of the field.

I sat down on a lump of pumice to take stock.

After a few moments the sheep ambled back to investigate . I say investigate. They bumped me a bit and blinked occasionally. One of them snuffled. Model of evolution, this lot.

Spurning modesty I changed into my only spare shirt, pulled on a pair of hiking boots and tied my stinking blouse and Liz Lewitt originals by their sleeves and laces respectively around the neck of the nearest sheep. Let the locals make what they will of that, I thought with savage amusement as I began to walk towards the village.

Lock up your sons and your fossils. Professor Bernice Summerfield was here - and you better believe it.

Well, the sheep believed it anyway.

From the air Dogubayazit had seemed no more than a ridge or two away.

Like hell it was. Sven had the hands of a child molester and the unerring navigation skills of a malfunctioning Scud. I walked for two kilometres before I found the road. I walked along it for a kilometre or so. I fretted. I sweated. I swore a death oath to pilots in general and Norwegian ones named Sven in particular. I shouted abuse at the sheep and Jason. I stamped my feet. I nearly twisted my ankle twice. Half an hour later I left the road. After this the going got better. '

My temper didn't.

By the time I had walked another kilometre I was hot, dusty, thirsty and obsessively muttering, 'A bus, a bus, my kingdom for a bus', in progressively louder and angrier tones.

Just when I was absolutely sure I would die from heat prostration having never again heard the sweet sound of an internal combustion engine, there came from .behind me an alarming set of noises. Chugging. Rattling. The clash of grinding metal. The machine-gun rattle of almost continuous backfires. I looked back along the road. Something was coming.

The something in question was knackered to buggery, lathered with dust, and covered with about a million wobbling wing mirrors bolted haphazardly to every outside surface. It was, nonetheless, unmistakably a jeep. It screeched to a stop beside me and a youngish guy took off a motorcycle helmet emblazoned with a really bad airbrushed portrait of Paul Weller from the Jam and peered at me. The lad had short, curly hair, old eyes and huge teeth in an even bigger grin. He pointed at me. 'Pretty view,' he said in broken English.

I glanced at the dusty grey hills sloping away from the road and shrugged with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. 'If you say so.'

He nodded happily.

I sighed. Time was when I could have blended inconspicuously with half a hundred alien species on worlds as distant as the Galactic Rim. Right now I might as well have been walking along the road with a sign round my neck saying: Tourist. Easy money. Please rip me off.

His grin widened. 'You go Ararat? You go Dogubayazit? I take. Five million Turkish lira only.' He added, optimistically in my opinion, 'I give very good bargain, yes?'

I shrugged. 'Five million huh? You see a suitcase anywhere?'

The lad frowned. 'Beg pardon?'

I shook my head. 'Never mind. Will you take dollars?' The grin was back in an instant; the lad almost quivered with joy. 'Yes. I take dollars. One hundred only. You get good bargain.'

'So you say.' I handed over half the money and climbed into the jeep. It rocked and the gears clashed horribly as the lad accelerated back

along the road the way I had just come. I sat down suddenly on something sharp.

Grabbing the offending article I saw it was one of my Liz Lewitt originals.

The other, and my shirt, rested on the back seat.

I glared in outrage at the lad driving the jeep. 'You've been following me all this way? You watched me walk three kilometres in the wrong direction and you didn't offer me a lift?' Another thought struck me. 'You watched me change my clothes?'

He grinned. 'Pretty view.'

To this day I have no idea how I stopped myself killing him.

- - -

The lad's name was Dilaver. He drove on in silence broken only by the clashing of gears and the muttering of distant guns.

Dogubayazit was (I use the past tense deliberately: check your World Atlas of Nuclear Explosions for more info) a village built on the ruins of a village.

The original had been largely destroyed twenty years before by the same border war which was currently raging - it seemed only the technology had changed, and that not much. The soldiers had bigger guns and they fired different slugs - but they'd still kill you. In many ways I was grateful that I had a guide through the troubles. Even if the silly boy did have the bad taste to like the Jam.

Present-day Dogubayazit was probably little different in all important respects from the original. A muddy main street bordered by two-storey concrete prefabs. Thin streets winding between wasted buildings, While the village was fairly clean everything was coloured by the ever-present dust so that the general impression was of a jumble of kids' building blocks which had been extruded from the ground. Colour was provided by stunted trees and scrawny grass growing in small gardens, together with clothes and sheets hanging from windows and flapping on washing! lines. Noise came from transistor radios playing German industrial house music in three different languages, a scatter of dogs yapping incessantly at teasing children and the distant mutter of helicopters and gunfire carried on a fitful breeze. Nervous tension was provided by the villagers, who

either sat or stood in their doorways and stared at us as we drove through the village. I say stared at us. Actually they were staring at me.

Dilaver noticed this in about ten seconds flat and grinned. 'Pretty view' my sainted aunt.

Leaving the dogs to argue over some old scraps, the children clustered around the jeep. Clashing gears horribly the lad slowed down and waved at them. They pointed at me. Dilaver beamed.

I poked him in the shoulder. 'I'm not a bloody trophy you know.'

He immediately looked concerned. 'Pardon?'

I shook my head.

One of the scrawniest kids climbed into the jeep. I could tell she was a girl only by the fact she was wearing a dress. I picked her up and made as if to throw her out.

Dilaver said, 'My sister.' He pointed at me. 'Lady go Ararat. I take. She pay good.' He waved a fist full of dollars at the kids. Immediately about half a dozen more scrambled aboard.

'Hey son, I should warn you I puke in crowds.'

'Beg pardon?'

By this time the kids were chattering excitedly and leaping up and down on the seats and poking interestedly at my rucksack and running their fingers through my hair and hugging me. The lad gave one ten-year-old who was jumping on my shirt a backhander and he toppled from the jeep on to the road. I looked around in concern but he was up and running after us in a moment, yelling indignantly.

Dilaver flipped the kid the bird.

I poked the lad again. 'Is there somewhere to stay here?'

'Beg pardon?'

I removed a scrawny kid from my lap, pulled another off my rucksack, disentangled my hair from a third and gave my hair slide up as a casualty of war. 'Hotel. Motel. Bed and breakfast. Flophouse. Dive.'

Dilaver beamed. 'Hotel. Yes. My uncle, he owns. Much good price.

Two million Turkish lira per night. You get good deal. I make sure no cockroaches in bed.'

I scowled. 'I bet you would, given half a chance.'

'Beg pardon?'

This time I joined in with the punchline and he laughed.

A few minutes later we screeched to a handbrake stop outside the Hotel Royal. I use the words royal and hotel advisedly. If I had a lawyer I've no doubt she would advise me that the word hotel was in fact technically in breach of the Trade Descriptions Act.

I got out of the jeep. Dilaver was there first, holding out his hand. I paid him off and shook my head emphatically when he offered to escort me into the hotel.

The last I saw of him he was revving up in pursuit of nine-year-old twins who had swiped my shoes from the back seat of the jeep.

I shouldered my rucksack and turned to enter the hotel. Unfortunately for me, at that exact moment someone else happened to be coming out. The slatted wooden door took me full in the face and I sat down with a surprised yelp and proceeded to bleed copiously on to my only remaining clean shirt.

With a great effort I gathered my wits enough to dab the blood from my nose with the back of my hand. After. a second or two I noticed the same someone who had knocked me over was holding a hand out to help me up.

You guessed it. Jason flaming Kane. There is a God and she definitely hates me.

Jason smiled - that idiotic smile he gets whenever he's been naughty and needs to apologize.

I hit him with the Summerfield combo: a two-minute French kiss immediately followed by a straight left to the jaw.

The combo left him grinning like an idiot and bleeding from both nostrils.

'That's because I love you and that's because I hate you,' I told him as I walked into the hotel. 'And don't forget the bags.'

I tried not to let him see me crying.

I suppose you could be forgiven for thinking that I would have passed Go, collected two hundred pounds, and leapt immediately into either a dramatic adventure in which the fate of the world hung by a thread or, at the very least, straight into bed with my wretched, abjectly apologetic and slightly bloodstained husband.

You'd be right too, on both counts. But not straight away. Oh no. Life's never that easy. Not mine, anyway. First of all I had to survive the most intensely boring, frustrating and downright irritating nine days of my life.

I could tell my plans for solo archaeological indulgence were all beginning to go pear-shaped when the young woman behind the registration desk beamed so widely at Jason when he followed me into the foyer that I thought her teeth would fall out. (They didn't of course; I told you God hates me.) Adding insult to injury the woman, who could hardly have been of school-leaving age, practically had a fit of concern when she saw the blood around Jason's nose. It was ten minutes of wet flannels and girly faffing before anyone even noticed I was present, let alone in a similar, blood-dappled position.

I thought seriously about registering us in separate rooms. Then I looked at the woman carefully wiping the blood from Jason's face and thought better of the idea. I wanted my husband where I could keep an eye on him.

This, as it turns out, was a seriously bad move. Because all he wanted to do was apologize.

That first night, he tried to apologize so long and so earnestly that I didn't even notice the thirty or so cockroaches that gathered to be entertained by the show.

Finally I couldn't stand it any more. Have you any idea how annoying a man can be when he's trying to apologize? Especially when all you really want to do is lay him out with a two-by-four - or just lay him - and anyway you're just too annoyed by what he's done to think straight?

The fact that he cannot understand why you are upset simply adds fuel to the fire.

Here's how that evening's conversation went.

Him: Hey, Benjy-bunny. You look sad. Cheer you up?

Me: (I say nothing. They hate that.)

Him: Don't be like that. I want to apologize.

Me: (Nothing.)

Him: Bernice, come on. I made a mistake, OK? I'm sorry. At least talk to me will you? I'll wait outside the bathroom all night if I have to.

Me: (Nothing.)

Him: Benny, look. I'm sorry. I followed you four thousand miles to apologize. Doesn't that count for anything?

Me: (Nothing.)

Him: Do you know how much it cost me to rent a suborbital? I blew half the Doctor's plastic. And I threw up on the plane. You know how I hate flying.

Ha. I was like a big kid. The stewardess really had her hands full.

Me: (Nothing.)

Him: Jesus, Bernice, what the hell have I done!?

Me: (Nothing.)

Him: Don't you love me any more?

Me: (Nothing - but not answering almost killed me.) Him: Oh this is ridiculous. You can't stay in there all night. No one can brush their teeth for an hour!

Me: (Nothing - but I came out of the bathroom.) Him: Bernice. Honey? You want to talk about it now?

Me: I'm going to get drunk.

I slammed the bedroom door on the way out; I wanted to kill something really badly and three cockroaches offered themselves up as sacrificial victims.

Leaving three really first-rate dying squishes and a frustrated husbandly whine behind me I made for the bar.

I call it the bar.

The tables were packing crates. The chairs were the folding garden variety (with holes in the cloth and rot in the wood). The only pool table was booked for about a month and wobbled.

The room held about a dozen people, mostly American or European. They were all ages. They were loud. They were sober (which makes being loud worse, as I'm sure you know). And every damn one of them had a dose of Ark fever which would make Typhoid Mary look like she had a dose of the flu.

'- telling you the flood was real -'

'- and I both know there's no evidence to confirm -'

'- day of judgement is -'

'- day of the warm Pepsi more like -'

'- presence of the amomum flower within the structure proves -'

'- and money searching for the Ark on the wrong damn mountain -'

'- you mean it's my round -'

'- it's too wide and it's not a rectangle and -'

'- God says four hundred and fifty feet not the -'

'- cubit is measured by the length of the forearm not the -'

'- work of Alvarez Lopez in Physics and creation and -'

'- Alvares Lopez is talking out of his goddamn -'

'- water. Anything so long as it isn't -'

'- the photos to prove I -'

'- ever see a warm Pepsi again I swear I'll -'

'- messed up pixels of a malfunctioning spy satellite more -'

'- like it? I'd rather drink goat's milk -'

'- you weren't such a goddamned fundamentalist -'

'- straight from the damn goat before I have -'

'- the philosophical implications, it's the cultural -'

'- boat shape and it's sitting on the side of a -'

'- want it on the mountain the Bible says it's on not some damn -'

And on. And on. The bits of conversation made about as much sense as talking to a lawyer while drunk and stoned.

A tall, fat teenager with a ponytail was gesturing with a pool cue to underline his words. Every time the cue leapt forward, the ponytail shot our backwards as if to balance the first movement.

A woman with a spiky punk haircut and pierced nose was using a handful of pool balls to illustrate some obscure bit of molecular chemistry.

Two more were head and shoulders inside a large packing crate surrounded by something that looked very much like the dismembered remains of a side-scanning geological radar system.

Another had a warm Pepsi in each hand and was waving them like semaphore flags. I looked up just to make sure there were no helicopters in sight.

Shaking my head at this half-amusing nonsense, I moseyed up to the bar. I mean, the plank suspended from two enormous packing crates.

Time to drown my sorrows. Boy, was I mistaken.

With exactly the kind of perverse injustice which proves there are gods, this bar had no alcohol. No beer. No lager. No shorts. No little paper umbrellas with interesting, coloured: debilitating liquids wrapped around them.

Nothing.

The bar was tended by a grumbling, skinny man with a nose like Concorde and deepset eyes. He had two pieces of cotton balled up and jammed into his ears, no doubt in an attempt to dull the oral warfare being conducted around him. I ordered a drink.

He didn't hear me.

I leant across the bar and shouted, 'The strongest drink you have! And

make it a double!'

He produced a can of Pepsi. 'You say double, yes?'

He produced another Pepsi. They were warm.

'That one thousand lira. Each.'

I looked at him. Grabbed the off-white bar cloth and waved it in circles over my head as if in surrender. OK Jason. You win. I'll be your meek housewife and let you show me off to the boys every Saturday night if that's what it takes to -

I became aware that someone was looking at me. Not the barman.

Someone else. Someone wearing 501s and a dark blue hiking shirt.

Someone who until a moment ago had been arguing the pros and cons of satellite defence systems as archaeological tools.

He joined me at the bar, glanced up at the cloth I was holding over my head. 'Looks like you shot your principal rotor there.'

Feeling somewhat embarrassed, I stopped waving the bar cloth over my head. I said nothing. He waited.

Eventually I relented. 'I had a bad experience with a helicopter, a sheep and a man named Sven.'

The man grinned. The grin was OK. The rest of him was OK too. He was middle-aged, middle-fit, with a middling nice face and curly hair that was only just starting to recede.

I glared suspiciously at him. 'You a helicopter pilot?'

He shook his head. 'Uh huh. Marine engineer. And my name's not Sven.

It's Bill Raelsen.' He nodded a greeting.

I nodded back. 'In that case, yes. I'd love another drink. Thank you.' I gave him the bar cloth. 'Souvenir of twenty-sixth-century English madness.'

He laughed then. I ventured a grin in return.

He said, 'Did you know your gums are bleeding? I assume that has

something to do with the toothbrush you're holding. Or am I in for another long story?'

So I relented and told him all about it. And he listened and made all the right noises in all the right places. And he didn't put any moves on me, which was nice, and he did buy me fizzy pop all evening and later risk life and limb by sharing a bottle of hooch he'd smuggled in through customs, which was very nice.

All in all it was a very nice evening, all things considered. None of us saw the changes that were coming. Not even me.

It took me about a week to get to grips with most of the dozen or so people who comprised the two Ark expeditions. For the sake of a simple life I'll start with Raelsen. He was about the most normal. Not that that counts for anything around here.

As I've already said, Raelsen was a marine engineer. His passion was the sea. The last job he'd undertaken was to turn the Titanic's sister ship Britannic into an underwater museum. He knew deepwater mechanics like I know old movies. Actually, that's not quite right. His passion was archaeology - which until now, for him, had lain beneath the sea. Like all archaeologists he was a time traveller inside his head. He liked to poke and prod amongst the bones of history, turn them over, see what scuttled out from underneath. Whereas I would poke with a trowel and paintbrush, he tended to use heavy salvage machinery. Again, his interest lay not in the distant past, as mine did, but in the very recent past - at least until now.

I hit him with an obvious question. 'Hunting for old boats on the tops of mountains - that's a bit different from hunting for old boats under the sea.

Why the sudden change?'

His relaxed mood and ready smile vanished almost as soon as I spoke. He froze, warm Pepsi halfway to his lips. He frowned. When he set the Pepsi down his movements were distant and somewhat distracted as if he were lost in some half-forgotten memory. Something painful or sad. I filed this behaviour for later study and changed the subject. He relaxed immediately, the incident forgotten - but not by me.

What did he look like? Imagine a fifty-year-old Jeff Goldblum; a young fifty.

When he got excited or agitated about anything, every bit of him

would be moving at once. His hands and elbows, his feet, his face, all would be moving in different directions. He was like a human firework.

His mind was like that as well. They say some people can single-task and some multitask. Raelsen was a definite multi-tasker. He knew how to see the whole picture, never got bogged down in the details. At any one time he would have up to a dozen thoughts and actions on the boil, everything from radar spectroscopy to geological analysis to philosophical debate, to laughing at the antics of the local kids, whether he should break out the salmon today or save it for use with the avocados and goat's cheese tomorrow.

In the midst of all this animation, his eyes were invariably calm, the eye in a storm of intellectual and physical action. They were mild eyes, blue and watery. Sort of middling OK. I've seen sexier eyes. Jason has sexier eyes.

But not as interesting. Quite a lot of the time you had to guess what was going on behind them. Quite a lot of the time you guessed wrong.

Raelsen was here in Dogubayazit looking for the Ark. Oddly enough he wasn't looking for it on Ararat. He was looking for it on the slopes of Mahser Dagi, a mountain seventeen kilometres to the south.

When I asked him what was wrong with Ararat he just pointed across the room full of still-arguing people to a small man wearing a cream safari suit, and said loudly, 'That rock ain't big enough for the both of us.'

I did a double take on the cream suit. For a moment I thought it was the Doctor come back to haunt me. But it wasn't. I breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment there I was beginning to think a girl's attempt to get away from it all was doomed with a vengeance.

But no. The man Raelsen was pointing to was definitely human. His features - like those of all humans no matter what their age - looked younger than the Doctor. He was about ten years younger than Raelsen.

He was fitter and had a more I suppose you'd call it official air about him.

He looked up at Raelsen's words and smiled.

Bill introduced us. 'Bernice Summerfield, James Edward. Jimbo to his

mates, right Jimbo?

The smile widened. 'Jim's fine. Bernice? Charmed.'

He held out a hand. I let him wait and then took it. Best to these sorts of silly pleasantries over and done with as fast sable, I find.

'Benny's fine.'

That was all it took. He didn't shut up for an hour. Raelsen couldn't stop him. I couldn't stop him. Fortunately it was all interesting stuff. He was: Thirty-nine. Ex-military. Air-force. Test pilot. Ex-astronaut. Walked on Moon. Established first lunar colony. Met wife there. Geologist. Proposed in Sea of Tranquillity. Married by Earthlight. Made fortune salvaging lunar scrap from last century. Auctioned off same to NASA buffs. Moved to Illinois. Invested money. Local church. Modestly admit to being pillar of community. Marriage excellent. Kids. Three. Two girls. Wife died recently.

Miss her terribly. Belief in God helps.

He actually talked like that. More clipped than a barber with trim-fever.

Conjunctions and participles simply didn't seem to be part of his vocabulary. I don't think I ever heard him say 'and' or 'the' once. At first I was amused to think of him as little more than a walking military cliché. I later found out his speech pattern was due to a neurological dysfunction.

When you got past the dysfunction the man himself was immensely interesting. At least, I believe he would have been immensely interesting, if he'd lived long enough to form friendship with. .'

Something else to blame Jason for.

What was Allen doing in Dogubayazit? You guessed it. Looking for the Ark.

Whereas Raelsen had forsaken all religious references in favour of a muddy aerial snapshot taken by a mis-targeted spy satellite, and had chosen to search Mahser Dagi for the most important cultural icon in history, Allen was looking exactly where the Bible told him to: on Ararat. It was a source of constant, at first amusing and then annoying, conflict between them.

I decided a little small talk was in order. 'Little young to quit the space service aren't you?'

He gave a small, precise shake of the head. 'Sorry. Not with you. Nobody flies over forty. Forty-five tops.'

I panicked, tried like mad to cover it up by telling the exact truth. 'Of course, how silly of me. It's 2003, not 2103 isn't it? Still using chemical boosters aren't you? I always forget what year it is when the company is so much fun. One of my little faults I'm afraid.' I hit him with a smile as big as the, Moon and watched him forget everything I'd said for the last half a minute.

'So tell me, how come you're in here drinking warm mixers when you could be out on your respective mountainsides braving the elements, the soldiers and the sheep to discover which of you is right about the location of the Ark?'

It was a simple question and I got a simple answer.

It was about the only time I ever heard Raelsen or Allen agree on anything before they died.

'Result. of border war. Both mountains in disputed territory. Turkish Government refuses permission to travel. Military escort too expensive.'

'What they mean is they can't be bothered. The idiots have got the whole area staked out like children playing cowboys and indians.'

'New terrorist activity on Turkish border. Government fear repercussions if people injured when expeditions go ahead.'

It was the old Iran-Iraq thing again. Seemed it blew up for a while every few years. Boring.

I shrugged. 'So what? Where there's a will there's a way, surely? Can't you bribe the President? Steal a couple of jeeps? I don't know - just sneak out there one night when everyone’s asleep? How hard can it be?' -

Raelsen frowned. I think he was trying to work out whether I was taking the mick or not. He nodded towards the huge :packing crate open by the pool table, and the various bits of electronic hocum scattered around it. 'Do you have any idea how much a side-scanning geological radar array weighs?'

'Of course I do. I've got one in my handbag somewhere -' At that the fat guy with the pool cue pointed at me, braying laughter like a donkey. I stared him down.

When I looked back Raelsen was smiling. 'I don't think you understand how complicated the situation is.'

If you only knew how many wars I've been in and how many fundamental archaeological discoveries I've made.'

'Sure. With the geological radar you keep in your purse, right?' It was the fat guy with the pool cue. Later he would become a good mate but for then he was an irritant to rate alongside household bleach.

I bit my tongue.

Comments were coming thick and fast now. There's nothing so fashionable as taking the piss.

'And the chemical analysis plant in your suitcase?'

'Nah - that's in her powder compact. The jeep's in her suitcase.'

'She could take us there in her spaceship.' You know the crack.

I was on the point of cracking heads or walking out when the perfect solution presented itself. A man wearing the uniform of a Turkish major and the fifteen soldiers who ' accompanied him crammed themselves into the already overcrowded bar.

I stared at the ring of sarcastic faces.

After a while the comments petered out.

I continued staring for a few minutes then got up and crossed to the major.

I introduced myself. He ignored me. I smiled. He ignored me. I showed him the AmEx Platinum Card the Doctor had given me for a wedding present and told him how much money was in the account.

Two minutes later we were deep in conversation.

The conversation turned to haggling.

Money changed hands.

The major left the room.

Soldiers and scientists stared at each other in befuddlement.

Half an hour later the major came back into the room. He signalled to me and grinned. I had the attention of all eyes. I leant casually back in the deckchair, careful to avoid ripping the torn fabric any further.

'Ladies and gentlemen, this gentleman is Major Raykal of the Turkish Army and he has some presents for us. So quit hacking and start packing. The expeditions are on.'

There was a moment of silence. Then laughter. Lots of laughter.

I let them laugh.

Then I showed them the travel permits the major had given me. They were still warm from the fax machine.

They shut up.

'When all else fails return to Plan A: bribe the President.'

While they were reeling from that one I got my side-scanning geological radar array out of my handbag (contrary to popular thought it's really far too big to fit in a purse), walked over to the fat guy with the pool cue and the ponytail and shoved it under his nose.

'Buster - you owe me one. I think you know what I'm drinking.'

***

Chapter 2

She can't do this. It isn't fair. It just isn't. She's making it sound like it's all my fault.

Look. I know I've got problems, all right? It's not my fault Dad did ... things to me, and anyway, what difference does it make? That was a long time ago and I don't think about it any more. I certainly don't have a problem with it.

No. The problem I have is with Bernice bloody Summerfield. She doesn't understand me. Nobody understands me. So they blame me.

Well I'm not standing still for it this time. This time it's not down to me.

The Doctor told me it would help to tell everything. You know, write it all down in a book. To get my thoughts and feelings straight. He said it always worked for him.

I'm not sure I agree with him. There are things I don't want to share with anyone. But I can't let Bernice tell the whole story. I owe myself more self-respect than that. Don't I?

After Major Raykal gave us permission to begin the expeditions, things happened quickly. A dozen people began packing boxes and bags and loading them on to half a dozen Land Rovers, in preparation for the next day's journey.

Bernice didn't come back to our hotel room for hours. When she did her breath stank of whisky. And in the morning she took her bag and loaded it into Raelsen's jeep.

She was going with him to Mahser Dagi. Well, that was it.

She thought she was something special did she?

I talked to Allen. I had to promise to hump boxes and cook but he let me accompany his expedition to Ararat.

Both expeditions began at dawn the next day with a breakfast of cornflakes with goat's milk and two gallons of industrial-strength coffee. Spirits were high. Raelsen was obviously suffering from the excess of alcohol drunk the previous evening with my wife. As for Bernice - well as she says: she's at her best when hung over.

The village children turned out to see us off and steal things. When we totted it up later on we found they'd managed to get away with seven blank notebooks, two pocket calculators, a box of biros, Allen's Filofax, and the mirrors for a small solar power unit. They swiped so much gear, with such skill and imagination, I wondered whether we'd have been better off with them as an escort rather than the real military.

Breakfast over, two convoys of Land Rovers, together with minor military escort and huge - temporary - child escort, rumbled out of the village on to the dusty mountain roads.

Then Bernice's crew turned west and mine turned east and the next time we met nearly everyone we set off with was dead.

We drove east along the road connecting the Turkish provincial capital of Agri with Tabriz, the provincial capital of Iran. The road was a mess, mostly because it was used frequently by heavy commercial traffic: ten- and twenty-ton trucks, hauling cigarettes or expensive clothes or luxury foodstuffs or weapons. If Bernice was here she'd probably say the trucks all looked as if they should have Burt Reynolds or Kris Kristofferson or Dennis Hopper chewing cigars behind the wheel and spitting the cud at bear.

This was in addition to the military traffic. Halftracks. Personnel carriers.

Desert vehicles painted to resemble the local terrain. The odd tank waddling along like the proverbial ugly duckling, searching for a mother and a line of lethal infants to follow.

Allen's expedition consisted of seven people, three Land Rovers and about two hundred kilos of equipment and food. Though religious in nature, the expedition members were diverse in their scientific skills. Allen, a physicist, electronics engineer and mathematician, had picked his team with care, balancing diverse scientific skills with philosophical and religious experience.

As well as Allen there were five other expedition members. Major Raykal and two soldiers rode in a military jeep and two Turkish farmers hired by Allen as guides drove a clattering taxi to lead the way.

Riding with Allen were Samantha Denton and Jules Noorbergen. Both were geologists. Noorbergen was a geophysicist and Denton was a chemist.

They weren't married but I saw the way she looked at him sometimes and it was obvious they were carrying on together. I wasn't jealous. I certainly didn't wish Bernice would look at me that way sometimes. It didn't help that, with her punky haircut, pierced eyebrows and tongue and sprayed-on leather jeans, Denton was about the horniest bit of stuff I had laid eyes on since Paris. Not that I'd tell Benny that; she'd only be hurt. In his Levi's and loafers and effecting an irritating young-middle-aged optimism, Noorbergen seemed almost too normal for Denton's affections. Then again I've met people who looked like bank clerks who had the most perverse fantasies.

With some people, you just never know what the surface hides.

Travelling together in the second of the three Land Rovers were Janice Tanner and Goddard Schofield. Tanner, a fairly nondescript woman in her mid-thirties, was the expedition archaeologist. She was divorced with a kid.

He was about five, too young to bring on the expedition. I pitied the poor little sod stuck at home in Nowheresville, USA, being looked after by some relative or - a much more horrible possibility - the father. Schofield, a skinny, tweedsuited, pipe-smoking figure in his early fifties, was a Bible scholar and historian. I wasn't quite sure why he was here, not being a religious person myself. I suppose it was to check any findings and compare them to what the Bible had to say. In other words a job any small computer could do. Perhaps that was why I never saw him smile. Tanner seemed to be the only person who could talk to him without having her head snapped off.

Riding up ahead of the convoy in a battered taxi were the two Turkish farmers, Kuresh and Ahadi, along ostensibly as guides. They claimed to have a letter dating back to the First World War written on behalf of four Turkish soldiers who claimed to have seen a formation they called The Ark of Ages whilst marching home across the mountainside. I knew a blag when I heard one, but Allen and most of the others seemed to have bought the story wholesale.

The only exception was the expedition archivist, Candy DuFries. We travelled together in the last vehicle in the convoy. Just as well, since she drove like a maniac. Candy was in her mid-sixties. Her hair was wispy and grey and held in place with a set of Walkman headphones. Her one tape seemed to be a mixture of the two most irritating forms of music ever invented: hardcore industrial techno and opera. She had been to almost every country I could name, spoke eleven languages fluently, invariably travelled with a battered leather satchel full of

watercolours, and lost no time developing the really annoying habit of mothering me.

I looked around as we drove. To either side of the road, the terrain was rough. The ground was dry, the low hills strewn with rocks, their dusty grey-ochre slopes coloured only by tough-looking grasses and scrub. 'Horrible-looking place, isn't it?'

'What do you expect when the lowest land is five thousand feet above sea level?' Candy slammed the Land Rover across the rocks and pits in the road with a cheerful grin. 'Anyway - beauty is where you find it.'

'Is that right?'

'Of course it is. I'm an artist. The most beautiful thing I ever saw was a microscope picture of light reflecting from a housefly's eye.'

'Sounds horrible.'

'Look at a rainbow. It's just a matter of scale.'

The hills curled upward into distant mountains. The only trees I saw were clustered together on the mountainsides, where meltwater was regular.

There was a harshness to the countryside. But not only that. There was something else. Something almost frightening. I gazed out of the Land Rover and felt that something wild and dangerous was staring back.

Candy must have sensed my mood. 'I once heard someone say that Turkey was created by God to test the faithful. It does that all right, and then some. It's got a history of famine, earthquakes and almost constant war. You can see it in the rocks; the colour and texture of the land itself.'

The Land Rover jolted as if to make her point. 'There's a wild and terrible beauty here. It's the beauty of symmetry, of form determined by function.

The land is the people, do you seep

'No.' I bit my lip. The images of poverty and starvation, illness and death were just too close to home.

Candy laughed. 'Dear boy, you have the soul of an electrician.'

I thought of a dirty flophouse on Deneb Seven and the squat shape of a Denebian and what I had done for him and how much I had charged and how badly he had beaten me afterwards - and I said nothing.

My thoughts were interrupted by distant gunfire. The gunfire muttered for some while and then abruptly stopped. There was a long moment of quiet.

Then a dull thump which might have been an explosion. Then the guns started up again.

I found myself thinking questions I didn't want to think. I could see Candy did too. We drove on in silence. I gripped the steel rollbar and tried to get my feelings back under control.

It wasn't easy.

Twenty minutes passed with nothing more dramatic happening to break the tedium than a flock of sheep which had wandered on to the road.

Then, out of an otherwise clear sky, the drone of an engine became suddenly louder. A plane flew overhead, banked and swept back for a second pass over the Land Rovers.

The plane, probably a military spotter, flew low overhead as if its pilot was checking everyone out by sight. I bit my lip. Allied pilots did this in the Gulf War just before strafing their own tanks.

I waved nervously to the pilot, whom I caught a brief glimpse of peering out of the canopy through a pair of binoculars. The pilot did not wave back. The plane flew overhead, seemed to hesitate for a second, then, with a thunder of engines, roared off in a straight line over the nearest hills. The sound of the engine echoed briefly for a moment, then grumbled away to silence.

Candy glanced at me. 'I do believe you scared them off.'

I let my hand fall back into my lap, then changed my mind and gripped the rollbar again as the Land Rover swerved to avoid an apparently suicidal sheep, then lunged around a mass of rock projecting from the mountainside.

And there it was. God's mountain. Ararat.

We stared at the mountain and Candy continued to drive. She was

ecstatic.

'Boy oh boy. It's a whopper, isn't it?' She almost jumped up and down with excitement. Her foot jerked repeatedly on and off the accelerator and the Land Rover jerked savagely with her.

I stared through the windscreen at the jagged slope of the mountain ahead.

Rising from a sheath of morning mist, Ararat was a double peak sweeping towards a thundery sky. Its grey and brown peaks glimmered with a coating of snow.

'It's seventeen thousand feet high. Mean, moody, and suitably Biblical, wouldn't you say?' Candy pulled off a spectacular handbrake stop.

I jammed my eyes shut for a moment, offering a silent prayer of thanks that we were the last vehicle in the convoy. 'God must really want us to find this damn boat.'

The Land Rover skidded in a cloud of dust. Candy was reaching for her watercolours even before it had ground to a halt beside the road.

'Seventeen thousand ... how does Jim know where to look for the Ark?'

Candy grinned. 'Why, the answer to that should be as obvious as the nose on your face. Only the top was good enough for God's faithful to land on.'

Jason groaned. 'You mean the top? The very top? Seventeen thousand -'

'Yep.' Candy bounced from the Land Rover, dropped the tailgate and unpacked an easel. 'Anyway, Jim's always got those farmers and their letter to guide him.'

'The soldiers' letter? You don't believe that, do you?' Candy laughed. 'Good old Jim. He practically turned cartwheels when he found out about that letter. Personally I feel it's stretching. the limit of credibility to assume that a Turkish soldier would have marched across the border into what was then Russian, territory, not once but twice, in order to reach his home village.'

Candy grabbed a box of brushes. 'Still, if it makes him happy, who am I to argue? The fact that he "discovered" the letter when those two con

merchants tried to sell it to him for the price of an entire farm full of sheep was, apparently, not that important.' She laughed. 'Actually, that seems a little heartless. Let me put it this way: it's a great trip and somebody else is paying for me to be here and I get to paint all this beautiful scenery. If I get to paint an old boat as well that's just icing on the cake.'

I eased myself from the passenger seat into a slowly settling cloud of dust.

'You sound like you're on the wrong expedition.' I moved carefully. No telling what damage those last deep potholes had done to the old back.

'Expeditions are all in the mind, dear boy. Life is an expedition - to the most wonderful places you can imagine.' Well. Sometimes.

I joined Candy at the back of the Land Rover. I picked up the easel and carried it to a small hillock which was, amazingly enough, almost completely devoid of sheepshit. I set up the easel, peered over it towards the rapidly vanishing cloud of dust which marked the movement of the rest of the Land Rovers along the road.

'We can't just stop, surely? What about the others? What about the major?

Won't he ... you know, worry or something?'

'Oh they're all used to me doing this sort of thing. We'll catch them up in a bit. I am the archivist, you know. It is my job.' She adjusted the easel, clamped a board to it and began happily squeezing paint from tubes on to a palette.

'What about the soldiers? They'll miss us. It could get complicated.'

'Oh don't be so pessimistic.' Brushes flew, paint slapped the board.

'Anyone would think I'd need an escort to go to the bathroom. I am sixty-three you know. I have sons older than the major. Did I tell you about them?'

I sighed. 'Frequently.'

'Well. Never mind. Hold the easel steady for me will you, dear boy? The wind does tend to fling it about so.'

I held the easel steady against a gusty breeze for half an hour, by which time my fingers were numb and my back was aching and I was beginning to think about Bernice. About the way she had looked when she came out of the shower this morning, the little lines round the comers of her eyes, the way her hair seemed to have lost its bounce. The tired brittleness creeping into her sense of humour. How old was she anyway? I thought about other girls I had seen and the way they almost always looked both younger and more interesting than my wife. Well, not more interesting - nobody could be more interesting - but ... still there was something. Wasn't there?

Something about them that was more attractive than Bernice? Sam Denton had it too, whatever it was.

And Bernice didn't.

Candy peered around the board at me and grinned. 'There. All done. That wasn't so painful, was it? You can pack the tripod now, if you wouldn't mind.'

I sighed. 'Can I see the picture first?'

'You can do better than that. You can hold it for me until the paint dries.'

'Can't we just wait until -'

'Heaven forbid! You know what worriers these military types are. We'd better push on before they miss us and start to panic.'

'But just now you said -'

'Yes, well, never mind about what I said just now. The quicker you pack the easel, the quicker we can be on our way.'

I nodded dubiously, braved a cloud of diesel fumes as Candy started the engine, shoved the easel into the back, locked the tailgate and climbed reluctantly into the passenger seat.

'Are you sure you wouldn't like' me to drive?' I asked as Candy thrust her painting at me. 'I mean, all that painting, that concentrating, it's hard work, right?'

'Nonsense, dear boy, wouldn't hear of it. You're young. Enjoy the view. I've seen it all before anyway.' She rammed the Land Rover into first and gunned the engine as if taking delight in the fact that I no longer

had my hands free to prevent myself from being hurled painfully from side to side, battered by both the seat and the painting as Candy drove.

The mist burnt off as the sun rose. Ararat loomed before us, its twin peaks jutting into the sky above the shuddering windscreen.

When we reached a fork in the road Candy swung the Land Rover off to the north-east.

'How do you know they came this way?'

'The sheepshit on this road has fresh tyre marks in it.' I admitted to being impressed.

'Dear boy, when you've hunted elephants through the Mountains of the Moon, following half a dozen Land Rovers towards the biggest landmark in Turkey is a bit like taking bubblegum from a baby.'

Yeah, right.

We caught up with the rest of the expedition about five kilometres north-east, at a place where the road panned out into a rocky field and then just seemed to disappear amongst a scattering of goats.

The other vehicles were parked in a semicircle, with the major's jeep off to one side. The two soldiers with him were sitting on the ground beside the jeep sipping hot coffee from cracked china mugs.

Everyone else was huddled around a fire and waiting for us. At first I was pleased. It felt nice to be wanted. Then I realized the truth. It was lunchtime by now; the food was in our Land Rover.

After lunch Allen sat everyone down in the shade of a rocky outcropping and made tentative plans to scale the mountain.

'Drive into foothills. Two hours. Buy mules at Nehira village. Distribute equipment. Proceed on foot to summit.' Denton looked at the crate containing the heavy geological radar and frowned. 'How far will we have to climb?'

'Five thousand feet. Six. Not far.' 'Can we ride the mules?'

Allen shook his head. 'No money. We walk. Good. Make fit.' For some reason he looked at me as he said this. I compared the amount of equipment stowed in the Land Rovers with the number of people who

would have to carry it. Great. See where marriage to Bernice Surnmerfield will get you?

Allen went on, 'Make camp at nightfall. Deploy frequency generator. First light. Look for iron. Artificial configuration. Confirm with geological radar.

Find boat. Become rich. Become famous.'

Candy laughed. 'Dear boy, you're such an optimist.'

Jim smiled quirkily. 'Am scientist. Have walked on Moon. Finding big boat on mountain not difficult.'

It was at this moment that I first realized there was not much to choose between the methodology of the two expeditions. All right, Allen and Raelsen were searching on different mountains, and they were driven by very different philosophies. But essentially they were using the same methods to find the same thing: the remains of a boat aged some five thousand years, built of wood, which utilized iron in its construction, in the form of nails and pegs. These nails would have survived even being buried under rock and would still, hopefully, retain something close to the configuration they had been in when part of a functioning sea vessel.

I was not the only one to appreciate the irony of Jim's plan: the frequency generator, first developed late in the previous century to search for metallic remains of wrecked ships, would now serve to locate a boat which was five thousand years and two hundred and fifty kilometres away from the nearest sea.

The remains of the' meal were buried, the utensils cleaned and packed.

The expedition moved on through a grey wilderness of landscape, which became almost surreal in its monotony, coming, after several more hours'

travel, through a small mountain pass to the village of Nehira.

Nehira was a splotch of colour dumped in the middle of endless grey-brown land. Candy muttered obsessively about its being à jewel at Ararat's scarred, rocky. throat', while feverishly applying paint to canvas. There were two streets with a small number of dwellings, a few farms, a smaller number of children and - if anything - a larger proportion of people trying to sell home-made carpets. I suppose they

have to do something with all that wool.

Candy bought a carpet.

Everyone else bought mules.

Actually we rented them for an extortionate amount of money. But since the village economy would probably have failed without them, Jim had to agree to (a) return them alive and uninjured on pain of something horrible of a religious nature happening to his children, and (b) leave three of the Land Rovers as security. This in addition to the cost of the animals, naturally.

When the expedition set out once again from the village it was in high spirits.

All except for me, that is. I stared up at the cloud-wreathed mass of stone looming over us and I scowled.

Five thousand feet. Five thousand sodding feet.

Bugger the boat. I wanted a rest. I wanted a drink. I wanted eggs Benedict with Worcester sauce and a gallon of fresh orange juice and a stack of waffles on a china plate. I wanted clean clothes. I wanted a bath. I wanted a nice bed. Preferably with someone nice in it.

Bugger you, Bernice. It's all your sodding fault.

I started to walk.

Despite growing blisters we made good time. We climbed for several hours before the altitude and the steadily increasing slope defeated us.: Then we set up camp, started a fire and boiled up some coffee. Everyone seemed tired but excited. They all wanted to talk. They all did talk. They kept me awake half the night wagging their chins about what they might find.

Trouble started at first light when one of the two farmers, Kuresh, got into an argument, with one of the Turkish soldiers, a thin, sour-faced man named Mehmet Ozer. The argument started over breakfast and ended with Kuresh staring down the barrel of a rifle, while the rapier-thin point of his shin sofu dagger rested on Ozer's shirt, little more than a good deep breath from the soldier's heart.

Major Raykal broke the shocked silence. He spoke softly in Arabic. He spoke only to Ozer but it was obvious his words affected Kuresh too.

As soon as he spoke, Ozer lowered his rifle and took a step backward from Kuresh. He spoke in a clear voice.

Apparently satisfied, Kuresh sheathed the knife.

I smelt burning, realized I was still holding a frying pan in which half a dozen eggs were now as dead as the saint for whom they were named.

The whole thing had happened so fast. From whispered beginnings among the soldiers to near-double homicide had been less than two minutes. I glanced at Candy.

'The farmers here don't like the military.' Candy took the pan from me and tipped the scorched eggs away. 'They're famous for their underhand methods.'

'Of what?'

'Everything.'

'I see.'

'No you don't. Everyone knows about the letter that Kuresh and Ahadi tried to sell to Jim. The one that contains an account of seeing the Ark. Ozer and the other soldiers think it's a fake. They know the routes a soldier would have taken as well as anyone - and they don't include two long marches over what was then the Russian border on to Ararat.'

'So Kuresh was defending his family honour?'

'Dear boy, don't be obtuse. Kuresh was defending his right to sell a bit of hokum to Jim for loads of money.'

'Does Jim know this?'

'Can Jim speak Arabic?'

'I see your point.'

'Good. Now I reckon it's time to cook up some more eggs, don't you?'

Breakfast continued and the conversation levels slowly returned to normal: By the time the conversation turned towards breaking out the frequency generator and anticipating what might be found, only two small groups were not entering into the animated discussion. They

were, predictably, the two farmers and the three soldiers. Each of these two small groups sat some way apart from the rest, scraping breakfast from bowls; the farmers in silence, the soldiers laughing amongst themselves. Occasionally members of the groups would exchange significant glances. I realized the situation was not resolved yet.

After breakfast Denton and Noorbergen deployed the frequency generator.

This consisted of a computer, a printer, a number of seismic probes, an equal number of metal spikes and a whole load of wires and satellite dishes to connect them together.

Denton explained how it worked as I rubbed dirt across the breakfast pans to clean them.

'The basic component of matter is the atom, right? You know the deal - all sorts of particles, different weights, some positive, some negative, all in motion in or around the nucleus.'

I murmured assent, continued to scrub. None of Denton's words made the slightest sense to me but she had a nice voice. Since my argument with Bernice I had been pining for a bit of female attention - well, female attention from someone not old enough to be my mother.

Denton continued, 'Atoms combine to form molecules, right? A complex arrangement of electrons orbiting positively charged nuclei. With me so far?'

'Like this you mean?' I swirled the pan I was holding. A whirlpool of dust circled a stubborn patch of egg glued to the middle of the pan.

Denton grinned ironically. It wasn't quite the response I'd hoped for. 'Close enough. Anyway. These rocks, right, contain different atoms. Different atoms for different metals. So your radiation wavelength caused by the motion of these different atoms is of a different frequency for each metal.

Yeah?'

'Absolutely.' I nodded, scrubbed, reached for another pan. 'What we've got here -' Denton nodded towards the open crate full of equipment '- is basically a transmitter. We connect it to these probes, right, and punch a signal into the ground. Water is the best medium but damp soil will do at a pinch. When the signal comes back we can tell what

kind of molecules it bounced off of. We can set the receiver here -' she tapped the computer '-

to screen out frequencies we don't want.'

I decided it was time to show how quick a study I was. `So you can build up a picture of the ground. A three-dimensional picture?'

Denton connected various components together and booted up the computer. `You got it. We could find a rowing boat by its rowlocks if it's buried in these hills. You want to help?'

This was more like it. `Sounds more interesting than cleaning pans. What can I do?'

'Grab that mallet and those metal spikes and go bang them in the ground for me. About half a mile apart should do the trick. I'll come and set the probes in place when you've finished.'

I blinked. Had I heard her right? Òh. Right. This mallet here?'

'Uh huh.'

Ànd these spikes?'

'Please.'

`These heavy spikes?'

She smiled. `Thanks, Jase. You're a star.'

Trapped by my own efforts, I had no choice but to pick up the three metal spikes. I walked in the direction Denton had indicated. As I walked I muttered, `sod, sod, sod', in time with each step.

Five hundred and seventy-three sods later I hammered the first spike into the ground. It felt good to hit something that couldn't hit back.

The second spike was harder since the ground sloped uphill.

The third was almost impossible, as the hill was even steeper here.

Eventually all three spikes were positioned. By this time I was positioned a good hundred or so feet above the camp and about half a mile from it. I perched on a rock to have a breather. It was hard drawing breath this high -

but the view was worth it. Beyond a fold in the rock wall I could see the plateau spread out, a crumpled cloth of rock and hills, shallow valleys, grainy speckles that were sheep or goats further down among the sporadic farms. Turkey. And across the border - what was that? Armenia? I tried to remember something important about the local social-political-economic setup. Nothing came to mind. That sort of thing was really Benny's area of expertise. I was just a tourist.

A military jet flew overhead, white contrail stretching across the blue-grey sky. Concorde had made a trail like that when we'd arrived in France.

Paris had been fun, for a while. Being tourists had been fun. For a while.

I watched the contrail blur until it was lost amongst the clouds.

I tried to remember the good times Benny and I had shared in Paris. I couldn't. Well, there was that time in the gift shop - but no. She hadn't actually been there, had she? Well, not at the start, anyway. After a moment I found I couldn't remember when the excitement of the honeymoon had worn off - to be replaced with restlessness, and a nerve-racking claustrophobia.

I sighed. I knew what it was.

Early-twenty-first-century Earth was boring. Sex was boring.

No. Not quite.

Sex with Bernice was boring.

I wondered when our marriage had begun to fail.

At that moment footsteps crunched on the rocky hillside. Jules Noorbergen trudged into view carrying the last of the seismic probes. He smiled when he saw me, hunkered down beside me in the lee of the rock, eyes shaded, gazing out across the torn and barren landscape.

Without speaking I pointed at the metal spike I had just hammered into the ground. He fitted the probe to the spike, activated it and adjusted the high gain antenna so it was aligned with the camp.

He muttered quietly into a walkie-talkie.

`How long will this take?' I asked when Noorbergen had put the radio back into the pocket of his windcheater.

'Matter of minutes for a first approximation. They'll have a detailed map of the local area by the time we get back to base camp.' He took a moment to study the view. His curly hair stood up on end, lifted by a stiff breeze. His angular face was lit by a thin shaft of sunlight so that for a moment he seemed on the verge of a tremendous revelation.

'Excited?'

'You betcha. Equipment like this has never been used for this sort of job before. It could make the difference.'

'What kind of difference?'

'The difference. Between success and failure.'

'You really think we could find the Ark?'

'Maybe. Yeah. Just maybe.'

'What about Benny's expedition? They've got the same gear haven't they?'

'Raelsen? Oh yeah. But he's looking on the wrong mountain.'

'How do you know?'

Noorbergen shrugged, squinted against a sudden gust of wind. 'Dunno. A feeling. Something. Dunno. I just know I'm right.'

That's what I thought when I married Benny.

Noorbergen jumped up. 'What are we waiting for then? Let's get back and crack the champagne.' He set off back down the slope.

I followed more slowly. When I reached the camp it was to walk into a confused hubbub of voices. Denton was clutching a long paper printout and dancing around the campfire. Candy was shooting video footage of everyone. Even the soldiers seemed to be infected by the mood. Those not posted to guard the camp.

'- even allowing for distortion it's definitely -'

'- boats simply aren't that -'

'- end's the stem and which the -'

'- made of wood would have collapsed centuries ago -'

'- about this mass? Obviously an intrusion but -'

'- explain the shape - it can't all be made of -'

'- damn printout show any discrete objects like nails or -'

'- stone -'

'- hull pool -'

'- earthquake damage -'

'- the size is all wrong -'

'- the size is spot on -'

'- the shape is -'

'- the geological position is -'

'- no way it would have retained its shape after so much -'

'- the hell is it supposed to be made of if it isn't -'

Denton grabbed Noorbergen and draped the printout around his shoulders, danced him around the fire.

Candy walked towards me waving a camcorder. 'Care to comment for the record?'

'You found it?' Jason asked. 'Already?'

'We found something. It's rectangular. It fits the classical description.' She shrugged. 'We won't know what it is exactly until we perform the radar scan.'

I thought about this while watching the revelry going on around the camp.

At least - almost all the way round the camp. .

Only the farmer, Ahadi, did not join in the revelry. He was seated beside his mule some distance from the fire, staring at the Americans with curious eyes. After a few minutes Kuresh walked around a bluff

of rock and joined the seated farmer. They both watched the Americans for a few more minutes. Then Kuresh got up and walked towards the fire. He held out a hand to Allen and spoke in Arabic, following it up with halting English.

'I right. Letter right. You pay me now.' His face split in a hopeful grin as Allen happily grasped his outstretched hand and pumped it for all he was worth. Kuresh looked around then, perhaps trying to spot Ozer in order to gloat. Failing to spot the soldier, Kuresh returned his attention to Allen, and to Allen's wallet.

Candy moved in for a close shot as Allen broke open the wallet and reached for some cash.

At the same moment Denton popped the cork on a bottle of champagne.

At the same moment Mehmet Ozer staggered into camp carrying the bloodstained body of Major Raykal.

The major's throat had been slashed wide open.

***

Chapter 3

I was looking at a giant's playground: tumbled rocks as big as houses, shallow, giant's-footprint-like depressions filled with meltwater. A carpet of flowers grew from the water. Several thousand frogs told us in no uncertain terms exactly what they thought of these strange creatures who had invaded the foothills of their mountain.

Wondering if any of these big greenies were likely to turn into a husband-squelching prince at the cost of a good snogging, I followed Raelsen and the others and eight pack-laden mules carefully between the water-filled depressions. Boots soaked now would be uncomfortable for a very long time, and I had nothing to change into since the demise of my Liz Lewitts back in Dogubayazit. If there's one thing experience in field trips has taught me it's this: never let your boots get wet.

As I walked I did what archaeologists habitually do - I studied the ground. In particular the flowers, which were somewhat weather-beaten, with tall, thorny stems and shrivelled-looking mauve petals.

While I was looking at them Dilaver splashed into a puddle, grabbed a handful of stems, stripped the thorns from them and crammed them into his mouth. 'Much good,' he mumbled. 'Eat of the plant of Utnapishtim: "The old man will be young".'

I knew the story. It was old, its origins in the Epic of Gilgamesh. In it the plant was. called amomum - and it was supposed to bring everlasting life to anyone who ate enough of it.

I grabbed a handful of flowers from Dilaver. 'Let's hope it does the same for women, eh?' To Dilaver's amusement and enthusiasm, I began to munch.

Raelsen looked back over his shoulder and smiled. I knew what he was thinking: according to legend amomum was to be found in or close to the remains of the Ark.

I moved past Dilaver, who was still picking handfuls of stems and yelping every so often when the thorns proved more than he could deal with, offered some sherbet flying saucers covered in anorak pocket-fluff to the mules, shrugged when they turned their noses up at the sweets and ate them myself. The sherbet was flat but it took away the dirty rainwater taste of incipient immortality.

Raelsen was several yards ahead of the rest of the party. I drew level with him, panting not because of my exertion but because of the elevation, and handed him a stem.

He looked at me, took a mouthful, chewed, then spat out the pulped remains with a disgusted noise. ' '

I handed him a sherbet flying saucer. 'Immortality tastes like shit doesn't it?'

He laughed.

'So tell me: it's a big mountain. How do you know we're going the right way?'

Raelsen reached into his pocket and pulled out a waterproof envelope. He showed me a number of aerial photographs of the local area.

I noticed the NASA logo printed in one comer. 'Satellite pictures?'

'Shuttle pictures, actually. They show the Ark, known locally as the Tendurek Formation. They give an exact grid reference.'

I sighed. 'It's no fun when the machines do it for you, is it?'

He smiled. I could see he understood. He tucked the photographs away as we led the mules around a big, water-filled depression in the rocks. I chewed absently on my amomum stem. 'Do you suppose Utnapishtim had any thoughts on the

significance of frogs with relevance to the Ark?'

He laughed again. 'Got me on that one.' He seemed about to add something when we rounded a bulbous granite outcropping. Instead of speaking he stopped. Actually we all stopped. Conversation ceased.

We were here. It was here. We'd found the Ark.

It didn't look like the Ark. It didn't look much like a boat at all. It was a shallow depression in the ground bordered by low walls which rose from the ground to a height of a few yards. The walls formed a lens or eye-shape some four hundred feet long and about a hundred and twenty feet wide at the point I was surprised to find myself already thinking of as

'amidships'. Inside the perimeter the ground was uneven, distorted by the mass of stone we had walked around, which projected into the

formation for nearly a third of its width.

The whole formation sloped uphill so that the farther end was some hundred feet above the nearer, roughly on a level with the top of the stone outcropping.

Of course nobody was taking observations at this exact moment - they were all too busy partying.

Well, all except Dot Baumgardner. While everyone else had more or less abandoned sensible thinking and were leaping around and hugging one another, she was doing her level best to be Mister Spock. She tethered the mules. She watered them. She broke out the cooking gear and started a fire and put on the kettle and made two gallons of tea and while it was brewing broke out her field analysis kit and started a compositional analysis of part of the main structure.

The only other person actually doing any work was E.J. 'Reefer'

McCormack. The ponytailed student was waving his camcorder round like a butterfly net and trying to persuade people to say something significant about the moment while puffing wildly on a joint, which he took great delight in referring to as thèCamberwell Carrot'.

In this respect he didn't appear to be doing anything vastly different from the rest of them. Raelsen, Ed Levinson and Ellie Noble the radar operators and Terry Sehna the archaeologist were engaged in a sort of four-point square dance with no rules. As for Dilaver, he seemed both fascinated and amused by the sight of these foreign adults behaving like village kids. He lost no time in joining in the revelry, hopping madly around the scientists, muttering `Pretty view', and `Beg pardon?' with a regularity they all seemed to find hilarious.

So I sat down beside the fire and made myself a brew and sipped it gratefully while watching the madness.

After a few moments the two soldiers who had accompanied us on the expedition came over, billycans drawn and ready for use. I plied them with tea and smiles. With depressing predictability they responded best to the tea.

And so the party went on.

After an hour I broke out my sleeping bag and tent. It was obvious we were going to get no work done this evening. I set up the tent, had a short but deeply significant conversation with the mules and then

went for a walk.

I found a halfway comfortable rock and sat on it, watching the sunset. I tried not to think of Jason and failed miserably. Bloody husbands. Why do they make themselves so important and then go and mess you up? They're so damn good at it. You'd think it was an evolutionary imperative.

The sun went away and the sky darkened. The mutter of distant guns was swamped by the chatter of frogs. I groped in my pocket for another sherbet flying saucer and held it up against the purple glow of sunset, wishing for just a moment that it was real and that it had come to take me away from all this.

I indulged myself for a moment, then surrendered to the inevitable and ate the flying saucer. As I munched my gaze was caught by something else moving in the sky in its place.

A plane.

It was low and slow. Not like a spotter plane. This puppy was big, like a troop carrier. I resisted the impulse to wave at it.

There were no lights on this plane. That in itself wasn't unusual. It was very quiet though. It passed overhead, vanished behind the peak of Mahser Dagi. I lost sight of it then in the gathering darkness.

The engine noise seemed to take a long time to fade.

I waited a long time for the stars to come out but clouds covered the sky without a break, scudding along before an indifferent breeze.

Feeling cold and suddenly alone, I got up, stretched and trudged back to camp. I didn't know it then but we were no longer alone on the mountainside.

I crawled into my sleeping bag and slept like a baby.

Next morning we breakfasted early and, over coffee, decided to split the expedition. Dot had spent the previous evening and a good few hours this morning working on the Ark structure and now wanted Dilaver to show her something she referred to as the drogue stones.

Most of what I knew about drogue stones had been learnt several thousand years ago in Egypt. A trip down the Nile on a trading boat had shown me how clever the Egyptians were at negotiating the

dangerous tidal flux at bends in the river. The high-sided boats they built were exceptionally susceptible to the tidal flow at river bends because they were built without keels. (Don't ask me why - these were the people that built the Pyramids for heaven's sake!) I once saw a boat carrying seventeen tons of trade goods come broadside on to the current while navigating a bend, and capsize. Half the crew were drowned or crushed. This sort of tragedy was eliminated by the use of drogue stones and a keel-raft. The stones -

sometimes with a combined weight of as much as ten tons - were tied to the boat at the stern and amidships. They dragged along the river bed and stabilized the boat. The raft was tethered by long lines to the bow. It's keel was broad and flat, built at right angles to the direction of travel so it would catch the tide. It was like a huge sail and it whipped the boat around the river bend fast enough for it to avoid capsizing.

Thinking about Egypt made me yearn for warmth and sunlight, not this dreary, cold mountainside. I decided that I would go with Dot. I might learn something - if not I could always daydream. I took my field notebook and a pocket camera, a paintbrush, my trowel, a packet of sandwiches and a flask of coffee. Dot took a dictaphone and her analysis kit and a portable spectroscope. Dilaver took himself.

At the last moment as we left the camp, Reefer ran to join us holding his camcorder as if it were a babe in arms. 'Yo, crew. Wait up.' He caught up with us, ejected a tape and inserted a new one with the casual ease of a soldier slapping a fresh magazine into his assault rifle. He aimed the camcorder, at us and made director-type movements with his free hand.

Dilaver capered. Dot frowned. I had to laugh. 'Lens cap. White balance.

Check the mike lead. Aim at the whites of their eyes and shoot to kill.'

Reefer fiddled with the camera. 'Yo, man, I'm on it.'

I stared at his joint, first of the day, a restrained half the size of the previous evening's Camberwell Carrot. 'I believe you are.'

Reefer frowned. 'Now don't you be getting on my case, Benny-mine. I like yo' white ass but I am dangerous when -'

'- wet?' I finished fast, then laughed. Reefer had been brought up on a diet of Spike Lee and Tarantino and wanted everyone to know it. The

fact that he was of mixed French Scottish descent and was as white as Wensleydale cheese did not seem to make the tiniest of dents in his lifestyle homage to his celluloid heroes. Which mostly seemed to consist of wearing hopelessly inappropriate clothes and spitting awful macho one-liners out through clouds of dope smoke.

'Roused. Was gonna say roused. Dangerous when roused.'

'Yeah. And I was gonna say that you know what the authorities'll do if they catch you smoking that stuff here?' I waited as Reefer attempted to adjust the white-balance control. 'Don't you?' I prodded verbally when Reefer looked like he'd forgotten what I'd said just thirty seconds before.

Reefer did his best Keanu Reaves. The hands, the frown, the works. 'Yeah, man but they ain't gonna. I as slick as the wind. I know when them boys after me. I got the sense.' Only his French accent spoilt the delivery.

'Yeah. Right. Like you know when the lens cap's still on.'

'What? Shit.' Reefer fiddled with the camcorder for a moment, then shot some establishing footage. He was halfway through a somewhat melodramatic voiceover when Dot finally gave up and walked off with Dilaver.

Reefer switched off the camcorder, sucked disappointedly on his joint.

I grinned. 'Never mind, Quentin, your day will come.' We followed the others south-west into the foothills.

An hour later we were still walking. The sun was up by now, burning off the ground mist. Footing was lousy. Despite this I was finding the old joy of being somewhere I didn't know awakening in me for the first time in ages.

For the first time since the wedding in fact. I took off my jacket and tied 'the sleeves round my waist, schoolgirl fashion. I felt like a schoolgirl, too, one who had bunked off class to search for fossils at the local stone quarry. It was a sensation I hadn't realized I'd miss so much.

Reefer aimed the camcorder at Dilaver. 'Hey man, we still heading right?'

Dilaver nodded enthusiastically into the lens. 'Stones. Soon. Much

stones.'

Reefer panned around at the boulder-strewn landscape, seemed about to say something, then decided to let the visual joke speak for itself.

We found our first objective within the next ten minutes. It was a chunk of rock ten feet high, five broad and about thirteen inches thick. Its flattest surface was covered with ancient inscriptions. Although well weathered, the stone showed marked signs of having been shaped by human hand. The weathering indicated that the shaping had been done a long time ago. The rock was about eighteen inches thick at the top - and there was a six-inch-wide hole drilled right through it. The hole was obviously as old as the stone.

Dilaver ran around to the far side of the stone, jumped up on to a nearby rock and peered back through the hole. 'Pretty view!' He waved madly.

'Pretty view, Benny!'

I scowled at him, remembering my shoes and shirt, and that seemingly endless walk to Dogubayazit. 'You'll be lucky.'

Dot noticed my tone of voice and looked curiously at me. 'It's a long story.

Tell me about the stone.'

Dot began to set up her analysis kit as she spoke. 'A number of them have been found here on the western slopes of Mahser Dagi. They range in size from three to ten feet high. They all have various Biblical inscriptions on them. Crosses, Arabic letters et cetera.'

I shrugged, ran my paintbrush over the stone to clear some dust from the inscription.

Dot said, 'For a long time it was thought they were gravestones. Soviet Armenia is full of iconographic stones like this.' She pointed to the hole through which Dilaver was still waving at us. 'But then, gravestones don't have holes.'

Reefer said, 'I bet that baby weighs more'n a Cadillac. The holes could be used for moving the stones.'

I let Dot tell Reefer why he was wrong. 'Put a rope through where that hole is situated and the rock couldn't even support its own weight.'

She shook her head.

I joined in. 'I've seen Egyptians use -' I coughed. 'Egyptians used stones like these.' I took a slug of coffee to cover my slip. 'It's a drogue stone. A drag or anchor for an unpowered vessel designed to run with the tides. It's shaped the way it is to create drag in water and prevent the vessel from being cast sideways in a following sea. Stones like this could be attached to the hull with ropes because the water would support a large portion of their weight. A boat

like Noah's probably had about fifteen tons of these stones attached to it.'

Reefer tried not to look impressed. 'Must've been one mother of a boat.'

Dot stared at the drogue stone. Her expression was a familiar one: that of someone looking inward, back across time to the thing which had provided their life's motivation. 'That it was.' She chipped off a tiny piece of stone and began her analysis of the structure.

I walked up to the stone, climbed a loose mound of dirt and peered through the hole at Dilaver. I made a face and he ran away laughing. Instead of his face I saw the double peak of Ararat gleaming in the distance. 'Hey, Dilaver. Are there any more of these stones nearby?'

'Oh yes. Much stones. Pretty view.'

'Goody.' I took out my notebook and began to sketch the markings on the stone. They consisted of a large cross surrounded by seven smaller crosses. Four of the smaller crosses were of the Maltese type; another had wedge-shaped arms, and two more were of Teutonic designs. There were also three bullet holes, which worried me even as I placed them on the sketch. 'Are the inscriptions the same on all the stones?' I asked.

Dilaver shook his head. 'Beg pardon?'

I sighed, pointed at the crosses. 'Are all the stones marked like this?'

He nodded, then frowned, shook his head again. 'All different. All crosses.

But different.'

Dot added, 'I would imagine they've been carved in the stone in recent

years by locals.'

I nodded.

Dot entered the sample data she had taken from the chipping into her laptop and ran the analysis program. 'There may be more stones but these may be buried, or have broken. The Turkish Ministry of Culture hasn't been too forthcoming with permission to excavate for them. The area has become something of a graveyard over the years --and it's easy to see that excavations could be misconstrued as grave-robbing.' I thought of the punishment for that and winced. 'Ouch.'

'Precisely.'

I finished my sketch, looked up to find myself face to face with Reefer and his ever-present camcorder. I waggled my fingers at the spliff poking out from behind the lens. 'Yo, Reefer, you seeing little flying elephants yet?'

Reefer lowered the camcorder and wobbled away to get a long shot, puffing smoke you could probably smell as far away as Iraq.

I munched on a sandwich and said, 'Well, I'm going to sketch some more of these drogue stones. Anyone for a short walk?'

Dot didn't move. 'Dot?'

She looked up then and her face was a picture. Shock. Amazement.

'What's up?'

She waved a hand' at the laptop. 'I ran the program three times to check.

There's no error.' She got up and moved to the drogue stone, laid her hand against the flat side. 'Reefer, get your camera over here now. This stone is more than six billion years old.'

Reefer shrugged, allowed Dot to direct the camcorder's movements.

Reefer zoomed in for a close-up of the stone, panning the lens across the hole and the inscription. 'What about all this shit, man? This all from Mars too?'

Dot laughed. 'Just because the stone is older than life on Earth doesn't mean to say the hole is. It'll take a lot more work to find out when the stone was worked, but I bet it was sometime within the last few

centuries.'

I realized Reefer had panned the camera to take in my expression and I waved him away distractedly. 'We have to check.'

'I've run the program three times.' Dot hefted a handful of little stones.

'These stones are a couple of thousand years old.' She pointed at the drogue stone. 'This one is six billion years old.' Again she held out the handful of stones. 'Metamorphic rock. Schist. Clay. Quartzite. This one here is marble. Analysis confirms the presence of manganese, chromium, all the elements you'd expect.' Again she pointed at the drogue stone. 'This one has a spectrographic signature unknown on Earth outside a laboratory.'

Dilaver wandered up at this point and asked in broken English if we wanted to see the other drogue stones.

Reefer nodded. 'Yeah, man. Just 'cause one of 'em's from Mars don't mean they all are.'

I stood up. 'Ladies and gentlemen, let's march.'

By lunchtime we had seen a total of eight drogue stones. They were all, in Reefer's words, 'from Mars'.

Dot sat down on a rock and poured a cup of coffee. While she did that, I wandered over to the nearest stone - a block some six feet high and three broad, again covered with cruciform inscriptions. I tapped the crosses one by one. 'Noah. Ham. Sheph. Japeth. Noah's wife. His sons' wives -' - and a partridge in a pear tree.

I took my spectroscopic analyser from my bag, placed it against the rock, triggered the sensor. Two minutes later I checked the readout.

I shook my head. 'Dot?'

'Yes?'

'This rock.'

'Yes?'

'It isn't rock.'

She got up. 'How did you - what on Earth's that you've got there?'

'Portable spectroscope.' Among other things. 'Japanese. Still experimental.'

I crossed my fingers as I fibbed.

She nodded. 'I see. And your findings?'

'... Show this isn't rock. It's not even very similar to rock.'

'Well, what is it then?'

I hesitated, then decided to go for broke. 'It's changing.'

'Changing?'

'Disguising itself. At a molecular level.'

Dot scowled. 'You've been smoking one of Reefer's joints.'

I shook my head. 'It knows it's being scanned.'

Dot licked her lips. 'You mean it's alive?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know.' On a sudden hunch I stood up on tiptoe and peered through the hole drilled in the top of the stone. 'One thing's for sure: it might be old, but it's no meteorite.'

Dot placed her palm flat against the stone. 'Not a meteorite. Not from Earth.

Possibly alive. What the hell is it?'

There was a long silence.

Into the silence a thought projected. I was looking through the hole and I could see Ararat. More specifically I could see the same outcropping that had caught my eye when peering through the first stone we had found.

Much more specifically - the outcropping was all I could see.

A thought struck 'me. 'Wait here. I'll be back.' Taking Dilaver and having temporarily relieved Reefer of his camcorder, I spent the next twenty minutes revisiting the sites of the other stones. I peered through each of the holes. I filmed what I saw.

The stones were all seated at different heights and varying depths in

the ground. One was on its side. All were at different angles. Yet when I peered through each of the holes, I saw the same view I had seen through the first stone.

They were all pointing at Ararat. Precisely at Ararat.

Several tons of rock, spread over several miles of hills, six billion years old, all facing exactly the same place - as if they were aimed there. Like telescopes.

Or guns.

Guns aimed squarely at my husband.

Why do they make you care about them so much, the wretches?

I went back to the others, told them what I'd seen, showed them the video footage. Dot bit her nails. Reefer looked nervously up at the sky, as if expecting to see Martian cylinders appear over the rocky peaks.

I pulled out my hip flask. 'Anyone want a drink?' . Reefer looked at me with wide eyes. 'Abso-fraggingglutely.'

I handed him the flask.

It was halfway to his lips when he fell over.

It took me a moment to register the sound of a rifle shot. By that time Reefer was motionless on the ground beside his still burning spliff, eyes wide and slowly filling with blood from the bullet hole in his forehead.

There was another shot. Dot fell over. Her foot twitched as she hit the ground, then she was still.

I moved towards her. At least I think I did. Everything seemed very distant.

Had I heard three shots or only two? Suddenly it was hard to remember.

I felt flushed. That was the shock of seeing two people I had just been talking with shot and at least one of them killed. I tried to look around, to see who. had done the shooting. It seemed to take a long time to turn my head. Then I saw a thin figure in black battle fatigues walking slowly towards me. His gun was aimed at me. I waited for him to fire. He didn't.

I fell over then, hand pressed to my side, surprise growing in me at the hot wetness there.

Oh, I thought as my face hit the ground. Three shots then. I thought I might black out but I didn't. Funny that, isn't it?

I remember all the old clichés but not very clearly and not necessarily in the right order.

I remember the man in black checking Reefer and Dot. I remember watching him turn them over and seeing the blood on their bodies.

I remember a salmon-and-avocado-and-goat's-cheese sandwich smeared across the ground.

I remember the soldier putting a bullet into both their heads for good measure.

I remember seeing my hip flask, hooch trickling out on to the parched rocks, a hand's breadth from my face.

I remember the man walking over to the camera, picking it up, rewinding the tape and peering through the viewfinder. I remember him grunting with astonishment, then irritation, then cursing in Iraqi.

I remember thinking, He shouldn't be here. He shot us because he thinks we caught him on tape. He shouldn't be here and -

I must have made a noise. A laugh. A sob. Something that made him realize.

He's not on tape. That's why he's annoyed. He's made a mistake and committed himself and now he's going to finish the job.

I remember the man walking towards me, his feet shaking, the ground like giant's footsteps. I remember him pointing' his pistol at me when he realized I was still alive. I remember the thunderous click as he pulled back the hammer, how big the barrel looked as he knelt beside me and brought it towards my face.

I remember gripping my paintbrush as if it were the last thing in the world, thinking, I can't die. I ate the flower of Utnapishtim. The amomum. I'm going to live forever -

I closed my eyes. The hammer fell. Nothing.

I opened my eyes. He was reloading the gun. The spent magazine was

falling towards the ground. So slowly.

I kicked his legs, screamed from the pain in my side as I did so.

He looked surprised. He swung his arms for balance. The gun went flying, clattered amongst the rocks. He fell.

I struggled to my knees, crying with the pain in my side. It felt like my jacket was the only thing holding my insides in place. I crawled towards him.

He started to rise.

I slammed my paintbrush into his eye.

He fell, his one good eye locked on mine, his face indistinguishable beneath his black balaclava. He screamed. He began to thrash. Blood soaked into the balaclava.

I waited for him to die.

He kept on screaming and thrashing, his hands batting uselessly at the brush.

I struggled to draw breath. My lungs felt 'like I was breathing acid.

He was still alive.

I couldn't leave him like that. I had felt the crunch as the brush had gone in.

Maybe his eyeball had stopped it before it reached his brain.

I looked around for the gun and crawled towards it.

I hoped the magazine hadn't fallen out. I was in no state to find that as well.

I found the gun, crawled back to the soldier, placed the gun against his head.

I told myself it would be a mercy killing. My finger tightened on the trigger.

Then I stopped.

He was already dead.

I collapsed. The gun fell from my hands. I lay on the ground for a long time.

I suppose I must have cried, because when I managed to struggle to my feet my face was wet. I suppose it could have been the hooch from my hip flask, or blood. It didn't taste like either. It tasted the way tears taste; the kind of tears you get when you're so angry or upset that you cry until you are physically exhausted.

I looked down at the man. The soldier. My side hurt like hell. My jacket and only clean

shirt were soaked with blood. It trickled warmly under the waistband of my trousers.

I looked at Reefer and Dot. Both dead. I looked at the camera. Destroyed.

I put one hand on the soldier's face and pulled my paintbrush free.

letting you keep that you son of a

Had I said the words or merely thought them?

Then I lost my balance, fell over and lay bleeding on the ground until I lost consciousness.

***

Chapter 4

I was staring at the long straight gash across Major Raykal's throat when Mehmet Ozer threw Kuresh on to the fire. I jumped half out of my skin. Until then the camp had been cloaked in a kind of stupefied silence. Now that was all gone. Kuresh screamed, rolled clear of the flames, beating frantically against his smouldering clothes. I tore my eyes from the dead officer and the dreadful, fascinating wound in his throat. Right across the campsite, other expedition members were doing the same thing. Allen was already moving forward to prevent Ozer's next move. He was too late by long seconds. Ozer drew his pistol and aimed it at Kuresh: By now the farmer had rolled clear of the fire and was beginning to stagger to his feet. When he saw the pistol Ozer was aiming at him he froze in a kneeling position. He screamed angrily at the soldier in Turkish while thumping at his robe to put out the last few smouldering patches of cloth.

Ozer shook his head slightly, as if shrugging off a light rain. The pistol stayed fixed on Kuresh.

To my mind it was all too clear what had happened. Ozer blamed Kuresh for the major's death. Whether he was right to or not was immaterial to the soldier. I had already seen there was no love lost between the soldier and the farmer. Now that conflict had come to a head, driven by an entirely separate issue.

Assuming, of course, that Kuresh was innocent. For all I knew Ozer could be right in his assumption.

Kuresh got slowly to his feet. Ozer frowned. The knuckles of his gun hand whitened in the dim glow of the firelight. He took a step closer to Kuresh, raised the gun to point right between Kuresh's eyes.

Kuresh had fallen silent by now. He knew what was coming.

So did I; I'd seen it before. Too many people on too many planets.

At that moment the second soldier - named Kazan - moved up behind Ozer and placed a hand on his shoulder, gently forcing his arm down so the gun pointed to the ground. Ozer swung around, his frown turning into a scowl.

I listened to the two soldiers speaking in Arabic, the one calm, the other angry. I tried to decide what to do if things were to turn nasty again. Half of me was saying, Jump in; the other half was saying, Run

like a bastard.

Then beside me there was another movement. Slow. Careful. It was Candy, moving not towards the soldier but towards the major's body. As I watched, she bent across the body and began to examine the wound in his throat. I couldn't think what else to do so I moved slowly towards her. I don't know what I hoped to achieve if things went pear-shaped - but I'd been in enough situations where I wished after the event I'd done something different that I decided to ignore the voice of common sense that was telling me to find a big hole, crawl into it and pull it in after me. As I moved - even more slowly and carefully than Candy herself - I tried my damnedest to look in seventeen different directions at once. They say you never know where the bullet that kills you comes from. I was going to prove them wrong or die trying.

The camp was tense. You could almost feel everyone in the grip of that flight-or-fight effect. I imagined muscles bunched hard with fear. I imagined cold sweat, the sensation of a bullet entering my body.

Then one of the mules snuffled quietly and the tension broke. I couldn't help a glance in the direction of the animals. Lucky sods. They don't know when they've got it good.

Ahadi, the other farmer, was sitting quietly by the mules. He was watching the soldiers closely, cold, dark eyes following their every movement.

Especially Ozer. As I looked at him, Ahadi stood. His hand travelled to his belt. Did he have a knife there?

I froze.

Something was going to happen. Stop him. Shout. Do something. I couldn't move.

Why didn't I try to stop him? Why?

For a moment it seemed very much as if Kazan was getting the situation under control. He was talking quietly, but quickly. Ozer was listening to his words. I couldn't understand what was being said, but it was clear Kazan's quiet, persuasive tones were having an effect on Ozer.

I decided nothing was going to happen after all. I relaxed.

That was when Kuresh drew his knife and lunged towards Ozer,

screaming obscenities.

Ozer turned, raised the gun, fired at Kuresh in one smooth movement.

One shot. That was all it took. Kuresh took the bullet in the face, fell back on to the fire, rolled off, clothes smouldering again, the back of his head gone in a mess of blood-clogged hair.

I went cold, frozen, unable to move. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion - yet it all happened at twice the speed I was able to move. People ran away from Ozer. They were yelling at each other and the soldiers.

Kazan had his hand on Ozer's shoulder. Ozer was swinging to face Kazan, his face such a mess of anger and hatred I thought he would kill his colleague as well, just for remonstrating with him.

He didn't need to. Ahadi did that. The farmer walked quickly towards the soldiers and thrust his own knife into Kazan's back.

The soldier fell at once, eyes rolled back in his head, a dying gasp at his lips. Ahadi was reaching for the soldier's gun when Ozer shot him twice in the back.

By now the confusion was almost total. People were running and yelling angrily. Ozer was staring round wildly, his gun pointing at everyone and no one, moving almost with a life of its own, hunting for another target to shoot at.

Candy judged her chances, moved carefully and slowly through the confusion to Kuresh's body. She prised his fingers off the hilt of his knife.

She lifted it slowly.

'Ozer!'

The soldier swung his gun to cover her, arm trembling. Anger, shock, fear, guilt? If he pulled the trigger it wouldn't matter.

Stupidly, I yelled, 'Ozer, don't shoot!'

He turned to face me, then spun back to cover Candy. The moment of indecision provided Candy with the time she needed.

She held out the knife. 'Ozer, look. The blade is serrated. The wound on the major's throat is straight. Kuresh didn't kill him.'

Suddenly everything was still and quiet.

Ozer licked his lips. His face was shiny with sweat. It dribbled into his moustache.

'Kuresh didn't kill Major Raykal,' Candy said again, calmly, slowly.

'Someone else did.'

Ozer seemed to consider her words. He took a step towards her, gun still half levelled.

He nodded, a slight movement but nonetheless a positive one.

I sighed. Thank heavens! He was going to -

There was a sound. Two sounds. Like muffled punches. Blood puffed out of Ozer's chest. The soldier fell to his knees, toppled on to the ground.

Shots. The sounds were shots. Someone had -

Another punch. Candy yelped with surprise, gazing in astonishment at the red stain growing quickly across her jacket.

'Oh for goodness' sake,' she whispered as she fell over. 'Oh Christ! Candy!'

I ran over to her. There was blood on her chest. There was blood on her lips. I touched her. She breathed blood and she died in my arms, her fingers clenched convulsively around the hilt of Kuresh's knife.

'Oh Christ, Candy, oh Christ -'

From behind me a warm, powerful voice said. 'Do not attempt to pickup the knife.'

I tried to turn, couldn't, thought for a moment I was paralysed by shock, then realized I was still holding Candy. I put her down and turned, stood slowly. My hands were lathered with her blood. It was still warm. Everything was blurred. After a moment I realized it was because I was crying.

Four black-garbed figures walked slowly into the firelight. They were unmistakably soldiers. Three of the figures were holding rifles levelled at the other members of the expedition. The fourth, wearing captain's pips, held a pistol. He pointed it at me.

I didn't need to pick up the knife to have the situation go pear-shaped.

Things started to go wrong again almost immediately. s

'Who are you? What are you doing here? What have you done? Who the hell are you?' Jules Noorbergen's voice was shrill with hysteria. I glanced sideways without moving, caught a blurry glimpse of the geophysicist standing, fists clenched, whole body quivering with rage and shock. Sam Denton had one hand on his arm. She wasn't talking, but her intention was clear. It didn't matter. Right at that moment Noorbergen probably wouldn't have noticed if she'd cut off the arm she was holding.

'Did you hear me? I said who are you and -'

The officer pointing the gun at me said, 'Be quiet.' He didn't turn and he didn't take his eyes off me. I felt like laughing out loud. He thought I was dangerous! He spoke again, his voice calm, warm, totally controlled. 'I am Captain Imrud Tammuz. This expedition is now under Iranian military -'

Noorbergen cut him off. 'Jesus H. Christ almighty, do you know what you've done here? You've shot American citizens. Candy was sixty-three for Christ's sake! You've shot -'

Tammuz turned now, said calmly, 'The old woman was armed. The soldier was armed. He might have shot you all. Be quiet. If you do as I say nobody else will be hurt.'

Noorbergen was having none of it. Shaking off Sam Denton's arm he walked stiffly towards Tammuz. The other soldiers swung to cover him immediately. Noorbergen ignored them, marched up to the officer, his body quivering, his voice maintaining its shrill hysterical pitch.

'- American citizens! I am an American citizen! I have legal status here. We have not done anything wrong. I repeat: Who the hell are you and what the hell do you think you Ire -'

Tammuz sighed wearily. Another shot punched the air. Noorbergen was cut off in mid-shriek and fell over. He did not move. Blood trickled from a small hole which had appeared in the middle of his forehead.

Tammuz scowled. It was the only such gesture I ever saw him make. 'I said be quiet.' He turned to the other expedition members, looking at

each of them in turn: Allen, Denton, Tanner, Schofield, and finally me. 'Does anyone wish to add anything to the conversation?'

Nobody spoke. Tanner began to sob quietly. Denton nudged her with an elbow. 'Shut up.'

I said, very quietly - and even more stupidly - over Janice Tanner's sobs,

'We have diplomatic -'

Tammuz swung his pistol to cover me so fast I missed the movement. He walked towards me until we were only an arm's length apart. I stared into Tammuz's clear blue eyes and wished to hell I'd never chatted up the girl in the Eiffel Tower gift shop.

I stared at Tammuz. I couldn't bring myself to look at the gun.

Tammuz waited just long enough to see me cry and then lowered his weapon. 'Does the zebra invoke diplomatic immunity when attacked by the jaguar?' he asked quietly.

I bit my lip until I drew blood, but said nothing.

Tammuz nodded, satisfied. 'I see you take my point.' He holstered his pistol. The other soldiers didn't.

Tammuz assumed a brisk air of efficiency. 'I require your data. Radar scans. Personal notebooks. Tapes. Sketchpads. Computer disks. All information will be surrendered.'

Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. Tanner sobbed and this time was comforted by Denton.

Tammuz made an abrupt hand signal. I jumped. One of the soldiers quickly began searching the camp. He emptied boxes, rifled through personal belongings, removed disks from computers, gathering everything that could conceivably hold information and putting it all into a black holdall.

As the soldier worked, Tammuz spoke. 'This expedition is now in my charge. You will obey my orders promptly and fully. I am sure I do not need to remind you of the consequences for non-compliance. If it makes it any easier for you, just think of the whole thing as one of your harmless Western boy-scout adventures. In a few days, if everyone does as they are told, you will have collected your survival

badges and be back at the hotel in Dogubayazit, drinking warm Pepsis and looking forward to meeting your loved ones again.'

Nobody said anything.

I licked a trickle of blood from my bitten lip and thought about Candy.

Tammuz indicated that we should all sit on the ground near the fire. I hadn't realized how cold I was until the flames were warming my hands and face. I stared at Denton. She was looking at Noorbergen, still motionless where he had fallen. She caught my eye but said nothing.

The soldier on roundup duty brought the frequency scanner printout to Tammuz, who read it quickly and began issuing orders.

One of the soldiers covered us. The other two unpacked small, hand-held devices and began to walk slowly up the hillside, waving them back and forth across the ground as they went. The boxes produced a harsh rattling sound which I recognized as the unique signature of a Geiger counter. The rattling noise got louder and faster until one of the soldiers gave a triumphant shout. He, called out some numbers to Tammuz. The captain checked them against the printout and smiled. At once he began to issue more orders. I could make out only one phrase, but that was enough to scare me witless: gamma rays.

The soldiers began to gather our equipment together into an orderly pile, beginning with the three laptop computers. Tammuz watched the soldiers for a moment, then said to us, 'You may put up your tents. I fear the night may be somewhat cold.'

Janice Tanner said, between sobs, 'Aren't you even going to attend to the

... oh god ... we should bury our ... friends.'

I was surprised to hear sympathy in Tammuz's voice. 'I understand. The ground will not easily take a shovel. You may build a cairn in the morning.'

'But -'

Tammuz's voice hardened. 'The dead do not feel the cold. You do. Sleep now.'

Leaving a soldier to oversee the raising of the tents, Tammuz collected

the computers, took them a little way away and settled down on a rock to examine the files.

I struggled to put up one of the tents. Gathering darkness and numb fingers and the sight of Candy's face floating in front of me made it hard. Allen helped. When both tents were up and Denton, Schofield and Tanner had unrolled their sleeping bags, Allen and I crawled into our tent.

The soldier remained on guard outside.

I lay on my sleeping bag. I stared up at the blank cloth of the tent flapping as the wind shook it gently. I bit my lip and felt no pain. I didn't feel anything; not the stony ground under me, nor the cold mountain air biting my throat and lungs.

My mind spun with the same questions which had killed Jules Noorbergen.

Who were these soldiers? What were they doing here? Why had they killed Candy and Ozer and Noorbergen? What did they want with our data? Why did they have Geiger counters?

What the hell had we stumbled on to here on God's mountain?

I lay there on my sleeping bag, beside a deeply silent Allen, and thought of Candy. I thought of her painting and her sons and the blood on her lips and the last warm breath coming out of her against my cheek as she died.

There was no way on God's green Earth I was going to sleep.

I awoke to the uncomfortable sensation of dried tears on my face and dried blood on my hands.

Somewhere men were shouting.

'Jim,' I whispered. 'Jim. What's going on?'

There was no answer. I rolled over and poked the sleeping bag. _

Jim Allen was gone.

I stuck my, head cautiously out of the tent. It was night time, the sky full of thundery clouds through which poked the occasional lonely star. The bulk of Ararat loomed close by, a threatening black silhouette against the dark clouds.

From the other tent I could hear the sound of Tanner still crying fitfully in her sleep. Sam Denton muttered something in an annoyed whisper. She was awake then.

I looked around. The soldier who had been on guard was nowhere to be seen. Nor were any of the others.

Voices rang distantly. What was going on?

I crawled slowly out of the tent. I made damn sure I kept close to the ground. I listened carefully to the voices as they were blown across the rocks by cold gusts of wind. I couldn't make out any words, but I recognized Tammuz's voice, calling confidently into the night. The wind changed and his voice became clearer.

'Mister Allen. You cannot get far. You have no water. You have no food.

Bring the files back now and we will say no more of the matter.'

There was no response except from the wind.

I thought hard. It was obvious just from that one sentence what had happened. Allen had crept out of the tent, somehow dodged the guard and made off into the night with the information Tammuz had collected. His way of saying' sod you, I suppose. Bloody idiot. These were soldiers he was dealing with. That bit of bravado could cost him his life.

I tried to decide what to do. Common sense told me now was the perfect opportunity to slip away, try to make my own escape and fetch help for everyone. The alternative was that I could try to find Allen and help him.

Indecision held me. I wanted to help; really I did. But ... well, you know. I bit my lip. This time it hurt so much I almost cried out.

A shout and the sound of a muffled shot made my decision for me. Dad always told me a leopard can't change his spots. Well sod you, Dad. I'm a coward and I'm stupid - but I'm coming to understand people a lot better than I once did. Keeping low to the ground, I began to move towards the sound of voices.

I crawled on to a low ridge and peered over the top. At that moment the clouds parted sufficiently to allow a glimmer of moonlight. My eyes were used to the darkness; I had no difficulty making out the

scene being played out a hundred yards away.

There was Allen, limping silently away across the rocks. Why was he limping? Had he already been shot? He must've been. Christ. Tammuz and his soldiers were away to the left, visible only because of the moonlight glinting dimly from their guns.

Tammuz's voice rang clearly in the cold air. 'Mister Allen. I must ask you to stop.'

Allen said nothing, continued limping away. He held a sheaf of papers and what looked like a small collection of floppy disks clutched in one hand. The other was pressed to his leg. Trying to stop it bleeding?

Tammuz took a rifle from the nearest soldier, raised it to his shoulder and took aim. 'You have one chance. I do not want to shoot a man who has walked on the Moon.'

Allen said nothing, kept moving. He was limping hard now, his movements painfully slow.

Tammuz said, 'You leave me no choice.' Allen said nothing. He kept moving.

I felt like screaming out for the astronaut to stop, because I could see they were going to kill him. Would it have done any good? With Tammuz as trigger happy as ever I am sure it would have resulted only in my own discovery and death as well.

He fired.

Allen winced but kept moving.

A warning shot. Tammuz had fired a warning shot.

I began to move, creeping slowly around the rocks towards Allen. I tried to make as little noise as possible._ I must have succeeded, because no one noticed me.

Tammuz fired again.

Still Allen kept moving, This time he didn't jump. I did, though.

I moved closer.

Tammuz fired a third time. Allen fell over.

I was moving at once. Common sense told me to stay put, crawl back to the tent, run away and hide - any of these would do. But something kicked me up the arse and I ran in the stupidest direction possible. Towards Allen.

Tammuz saw me straight away, of course, but I was several hundred yards closer to Allen than the soldiers by now. Dimly I was aware of Tammuz shouting at me. How did he know my name? I ignored the voice, as I ignored the sound of cocking guns and the rush of footsteps behind me. I was angry now. I found myself muttering something under my breath, over and over like a prayer. Sod you, Dad. That's what I said.

A leopard can't change his spots.

Allen was still alive when I reached him. Just. He had the papers and disks still gripped tightly in one hand. The other was weakly flipping the wheel of an old cigarette lighter he had managed to take from a pocket. The lighter sparked but every time it caught alight the fitfully gusting wind would blow it out.

Allen sagged back on to the ground as I knelt beside him. His breath rattled ominously. I knew what that meant. Lung damage. His chest was covered with blood, more speckled his lips. He managed to press the sheaf of papers into my hand.

His voice was a sigh, more of a cough. 'Do you understand ... do you understand?'

I nodded helplessly. I had no idea what Allen was talking about. The columns of data on the papers meant nothing to me.

'Get data to NASA.' 'What if I -'

Allen grabbed my jacket, pulled me closer. Where did his strength come from? The stink of blood on his breath made me want to be sick.

'Is same. Data. Is same as ... so long ... has been there all time. In front of faces. I walked on it; never guessed ... tell Raelsen ... the Mahser Dagi ...

the Doomsday Mountain ... tell Raelsen we were both right ... Ararat is key

... Mahser Dagi is door.'

Allen suddenly shivered, coughed blood. 'The flood. The flood is come! Oh God, save us all; the Day of Judgement is come!'

Allen fell back against the ground, his grip on my jacket weakening. As he fell his fingers opened. A piece of rock slipped out. I recognized it as his lucky charm - his moonrock - which he carried with him everywhere.

I began stuffing the papers into my jacket. I had no idea what to do with them. A voice in my head was still telling me a leopard can't change

to run, to leave the papers and disks, the others in their tents, just run away and save myself.

I dithered. Probably that was what saved my life. If I had run Tammuz would undoubtedly have shot me down. The soldiers arrived then. I looked up into a ring of guns and unsmiling faces, black shadows in the silver moonlight. Tammuz said nothing, merely held his hand out.

As if from a long way away, I heard myself speaking. The anger in my voice surprised even me. 'You realize you've started an international incident?'

Tammuz sighed. He pointed his gun at me. 'Only if the news gets out.'

I swallowed. Why had I opened my stupid mouth? One squeeze of Tammuz's finger and it was all over.

Tammuz waited.

After a moment I handed over the papers. Tammuz nodded his thanks, told me to stand up.

I looked back at Allen. Reached over to close his eyes. As I did so I scooped up Allen's good-luck charm - his piece of moonrock - and slipped it into my pocket.

I stood up.

Tammuz still had his gun pointed at me. I waited for him to put it down. He didn't. He cocked it.

He was going to -

Tammuz indicated my pocket with the gun. Very slowly, I took out the moonrock. Tammuz nodded. 'This is significant?'

I shrugged. 'It was his lucky charm. It's from the moon.' Tammuz signalled to a soldier. He unstrapped a Geiger counter from his equipment belt and ran it over the rock. My heart leapt again then. But there was nothing. Just the ordinary background radiation count. This rock Tammuz nodded. He uncocked the gun, but kept it pointed in my direction. 'If the rock comforts you, you may keep it.' He told me to lead the way back to camp.

The next morning broke damp and foggy. I had not been punished, as I'd expected, but merely left in my tent to think things over. Looking at Allen's empty bedroll beside me gave me ample opportunity for that.

Shortly after daybreak one of the soldiers opened the tent and told me to come out.

Denton, Tanner and Schofield were already sitting around the campfire drinking coffee. I poured a mug and drank thirstily.

I looked around for Tammuz.

'He's not here.' Denton shoved back her hair. Her face was streaked and blotchy, her eyes bruised from knuckling away tears. So it had been her crying last night. Not Tanner. I had twigged she and Noorbergen were close. I wondered how close.

'What's he up to?'

Denton shook her head without speaking.

I stared around at the others. Schofield looked all of his fifty years this morning. His white hair was in disarray and he had not shaved. He sat hunched over by the fire, an uncomfortable position, but one which he hardly moved from. Denton seemed to have withdrawn into herself as well.

At least she talked. Sometimes. Of the three Tanner seemed the most together. She had got it out of her system the previous night. Now she was, despite an obvious lack of sleep, definitely the one most alert.

'Jim's body is over there by the others,' she whispered. 'I saw it this morning when I ... you know ... went for a wash.' She bit her lip, sipped coffee, looked sideways at me. 'How did he ... what happened last night?'

I told the story of Allen's death in short, widely spaced sentences.

When I finished there was silence. Tanner poured me another mug of coffee.

'Hungry?'

I nodded.

'There's some toast and bacon on the hotplate by the fire.' The toast was cold, the bacon charred. I was not surprised. I ate three platefuls, then had to run behind some rocks in defiance of a watching soldier to be sick.

Afterwards I felt much better. I killed the horrible taste in my mouth with more coffee. While I drank I tried to get my thoughts in order. Allen must have had a reason for doing what he did. Astronauts are subject to the highest degree of mental and physical training to cope with unexpected emergencies. In this century there was no one to help you if your oxygen tanks blew while you were three days from splashdown. No. Allen wouldn't

- probably couldn't - have just gone off the rails as it appeared he had last night. So there must be a reason.

I watched the soldier pacing and waited until he moved a few yards away.

'Does anyone else understand the significance of Jim's data?' I asked quietly.

Denton sniffed, shrugged. 'What do you mean?'

'It's just that last night he was so ... adamant those papers and disks had to reach NASA. And yet when I reached him he was trying to bum them. As if whatever information they held was so important it should be destroyed rather than be allowed to fall into the wrong hands.'

Tanner shuffled into a cross-legged position. 'People do weird things when they're scared, Jason. Jim was scared. And he had been shot. It probably doesn't mean anything.'

Was she right? I thought about it. 'You're probably right.' I wasn't entirely convinced. I drank some more coffee, then voiced the question that was on all their minds. 'So ... what are we going to do now?'

Schofield answered first, without changing his hunched position.

'Speaking for myself I am going to do exactly what Tammuz wishes. I'm too old to fight a war.'

Tanner put down her coffee mug. 'And what if he decides to kill the rest of us?'

'We're all in God's hands now.'

Tanner laughed. It wasn't a nice laugh. 'You do what you like,' she said quietly, after the soldier whose gaze had been caught by her laugh got bored and looked away. 'I'm for getting out of here.'

Schofield shrugged his hunched shoulders - his last contribution to the conversation.

'Right. Sure. That's real applaudable.' Denton put down her own mug. 'But last time I looked no one here was able to leap tall buildings at a single bound or run faster than a speeding bullet.'

Tanner scowled. Her voice was quiet but deliberately cutting. 'There's no need for sarcasm.'

Denton looked up sharply, her voice edged with anger. 'I wasn't being -'

She stopped. She sniffed, wiped her nose on her sleeve. 'I'm sorry, Jan.

This whole thing is getting to me, right?'

Tanner nodded. 'I know.' Her voice was still quiet but the harshness had gone from it.

Denton sighed. 'Jesus. This is not good. Not good at all. Tammuz is never going to let us go.'

I frowned. 'Maybe he doesn't have to.' An idea was beginning to take hold. I remembered something Bernice had done back in Dogubayazit. I took out my wallet and showed them the double-platinum-rated AmEx card the Doctor had given me for a wedding present. I grinned. 'I've got an idea.'

I told them the plan. We would wait until given permission to build a cairn for the dead expedition members, then bribe the guard to let us escape.

The plan was so simple and dangerous that no one saw fit to argue with me about it. Which was just as well, since I wasn't capable of

discussing the time of day, let alone arguing the merits of a plan so loose it could get us all killed.

The first part of the plan went smoothly enough.

Tammuz returned to the camp around mid-morning. He looked very pleased with himself. Obviously he'd been up all night reading our data.

'You may bury your friends.' Tammuz signalled to a solider.

'Nazif will accompany you. You will take the bodies no more than two hundred yards from the campsite. There you will build a cairn of rocks. If you wish you may bless the grave when you have finished.' He added, 'I do not need to remind you that any attempt to escape will be...' He shrugged.

'Stopped.'

Nobody spoke.

Tammuz became brisk. 'Very well, then. You may bury your friends. Later we will discuss your data.' To Nazif, he added, 'Carry on.: Carrying the bodies was awful. Even wrapped in sleeping bags they were cold and stiff. The smell was slight but horrible. It took two trips with me and Tanner carrying the bodies. Schofield was unable to lift the weight and Denton seemed to be even less able to cope with the situation than she had been earlier.'

Tanner, on the contrary, was proving quiet, thoughtful and very capable.

The gravesite was a clearing in the rocks some hundred and fifty yards to the south.

When the bodies had been brought there, Nazif indicated that my friends and I should begin to collect rocks. Nazif himself sat on a large rock and sipped coffee from a thermos. Relaxed though I tried to look, I was constantly aware of the pistol he held at the ready.

Nobody spoke as the cairn slowly took shape. It took about an hour to gather enough rocks to begin the structure. By that time everyone, especially me, was ready for a breather.

I waved to the soldier. 'Hey, Nazif. Let us have some coffee.'

He frowned. In slow English he said, 'You build rocks. Rest later.'

Was it now? Was it going to happen now? 'We're really thirsty.'

The soldier set down the flask and levelled his gun at me. 'Work.'

It was. It was now.

I hesitated, then very slowly reached into my pocket. Nazif tensed, then relaxed when he saw all I had in my hand was my wallet. I took out some cash. 'We're willing to pay for the coffee.'

He understood that all right. 'How much?'

I took a step nearer. 'Well ... I don't have much cash ... but I do have this.' I pulled out the AmEx card and showed it to Nazif.

The card was a universal language all its own. Nazif stared at the double-platinum rating with wide-open eyes.

I told him how much was in the account. He could probably have bought his own small army with that much cash. 'I can authorize you to use this. Or you can sell it to someone who can use it. How can you lose? All we want is some coffee.' '

Nazif shook his head suspiciously. 'That not all you want. Coffee cheap.

You want something else.'

Here it comes. 'Yeah. We want you to go take a leak. For about half an hour. What about it?'

Nazif was silent, weighing the offer. He smiled and held out a hand. 'You get deal.'

I handed over the card, Yes! I turned to grin at the others. When I turned back Nazif' s gun was pointing at my stomach. I stopped smiling. 'I thought we had a deal.'

Nazif's smile widened cruelly. 'We do. You have coffee.' He handed me the thermos. 'Drink. Then work. I take long leak when other soldier comes.' He laughed. The laugh was thin and nasty.

I scowled. My hand gripped the thermos. A leopard can't change -

My temper snapped as Nazif s laughter echoed shrilly across the

clearing.

I'd had enough. All my bloody life people had told me what they wanted.

Nobody ever thought about what I wanted. Right from the day I was born till the

day I was married it was me, me, me and I'd had enough of it.

Now this ignorant bastard was laughing at me for wanting something. Well sod him. Sod all of them. I stepped forward and slapped him as hard as I could.

There was the sound of smashing glass. The thermos.

I was still holding the thermos.

Nazif shouted angrily as the flask smashed into his face, tried to bring his gun to bear. Unprepared for the blow, he lost his balance, slipped off his perch and fell backward, gun unfired.

There was a horrible crunch as the back of his head hit a rock.

I stood quite still, shaking. Nazif didn't move.

Sod you, Dad.

I jumped when a hand touched my shoulder. It was Tanner. I hadn't even heard her footsteps.

Together we bent over the soldier. His cheek was torn and bloody from the thermos. The back of his head was matted with blood. He was quite dead.

'Jesus.' I began to shake. 'It happened so fast. It was an accident. He just fell. It could have happened to anyone.' Tanner took my arm. Her grip sobered me up fast. Her voice was quiet but urgent. 'We have to hide the body.' She looked at the cairn of stones. We have to do it fast. Then we have to get the hell out of here while we've got the chance.' I felt myself nodding stupidly.

We rolled Nazif's body into a sleeping bag and pulled it towards the grave.

I wasn't sick but I didn't stop shaking until we were nearly two miles away across the mountain and heading west across the valley as fast

as we could.

***

Chapter 5

Heaven is a pain in the arse and God looks like Jason. I hate being dead.

When I woke up it was dark. My husband was staring down at me and to be completely honest I didn't know if I most wanted to kiss him or kill him.

I tried to speak. A few mumbled words came out.

Then I remembered being shot.

After a while I was aware of people holding me down. A few more minutes and the panic went away. I lay still, letting the sweat dry on my body, trying to get my breath back. I was cold. I wanted a cuddle so bad I could taste it.

Buggered if I was going to ask, though.

I screwed up my courage enough to move my arm. It didn't hurt half as much as I was expecting. I touched my side. My fingers came away bloody, but it was old blood, and not half as much as I was expecting.

'I assume you brought the Band Aid and Germolene? Jason frowned. His face scrunched into a shape I wasn't familiar with. Instead of answering my quip he moved aside and I found myself looking at Jan Tanner, one of the mission specialists from the Ararat expedition. What was she doing here?

Were they all having a party without me? If they were the punch was a killer.

Tanner said, 'Don't move too much. Someone shot you.

The bullet went through your coat but only grazed your side. I think it might have bounced off a rib. I bandaged your side and strapped the rib. It'll probably hurt like anything for a while but you're not going to die.'

Oh goody.

I licked my lips and managed a weak murmur of thanks. 'Any chance I can sit up?'

'I should think so.'

Tanner, assisted by Jason and Sam Denton, helped me upright. I couldn't help noticing the way Jason was staring at Denton as they leant me against a rock. I felt my temper rise. Was it going to be Paris all over again?

'Jason Kane, you're about as subtle as a brick to the head.' Jason gave a puzzled shake of his head. 'Sorry?'

'And don't think I don't know that look because -' I suddenly felt dizzy. I leant back against the rock. A moment, and I began to feel better.

Tanner was looking at me in concern. 'Here. You better give me that.'

Tanner took something from my hand, gave it to Jason to put aside. The paintbrush. I gasped with sudden pain. My hand jerked with cramp as my fingers uncurled - and I realized how tightly I had been gripping the brush.

At the same time I became aware of how cold I was. And hungry. And thirsty. I had no idea how much time had passed. I glanced around. The sky was full of clouds so I had no way of estimating the time. It felt like the early hours of the morning though. I needed to go to the toilet very, very badly.

'Where's the soldier?'

Jason looked alarmed. 'Soldier?'

'Oh yes.' I shivered. 'In fact I'm pretty sure I killed one.' 'Killed one?'

'Oui, Brer Parrot. Killed one. He shot Dot and Reefer so I stabbed him in the eye. With my paintbrush.'

Jason made a disgusted noise. 'You mean that was blood? I thought it was paint.'

'Call it performance art.'

'Jesus, Bernice!'

Tanner took Jason's arm, led him a short distance away and sat him down on a rock. That was fine with me. I felt like strangling him anyway. In fact as the shock of my injury wore off I was getting angrier all the time.

Tanner came back and joined the others. I saw that Schofield was also with us. That made four of them, including Jason, and one of me. Five people left. A third of the original number. What the hell was going on here?

Tanner sat down beside me. 'You feel like telling us what happened?'

I told them about it. They responded with less shock and surprise than I expected. When I mentioned this they told me how they came to be here.

I listened silently to the story and then scowled. 'Only my husband could begin a twenty-nine-mile trek across Turkey by smashing the only coffee flask.' Jason made some noise or other on his rock. I ignored him. It was just too much bother."

Schofield said gruffly, 'Your husband's actions enabled us to escape.'

'My husband's actions could mean we all die of thirst,' I snapped back.

Schofield twisted his face into a reassuringly familiar scowl. I found the expression almost comforting.

'What are you grinning at?'

I shook my head. 'Nothing.' Facing Tanner, whose smile indicated she had grasped the humour in the situation, I said, 'So you've been walking for a whole day?'

Tanner nodded. 'So have you by the look of it.' Her smile melted into a thoughtful frown. 'You don't remember do you?'

Slowly I shook my head.

Denton, who I noticed had moved closer to Jason, said, 'I suppose you could have bashed your head when you fell, right? You might have concussion. Short-term memory loss is common with that sort of thing.'

Jason added, too loudly, 'So are subdural haematomas.'

No one said anything for a moment, then Tanner shrugged. 'I don't think you're in any danger.'

Jason muttered something beneath his breath, which got him a sharp look from Denton. God, I wanted to ping her eyebrow rings so badly.

I stared at Jason. 'I beg your pardon?' 'Nothing.'

I'd heard what he said but didn't bother to argue. One crack about the state of my hip flask was not important. We had more important questions to answer. '

Uppermost in my mind was the question of what had happened to Raelsen and the others. Were they dead too? Obviously the attacks on both expeditions had been coordinated. Or had they? I remembered no insignia on the soldier I had killed. Tammuz had said he was Iranian; it was logical to infer that the two assault parties were from the same country. But there was no guarantee.

'What do you suppose they were after?'

Tanner spoke quietly. 'They had Geiger counters. They mentioned gamma particle activity.'

'Gamma radiation?' I thought aloud. 'Uranium then? That would make political sense. Uranium deposits here could change the balance of power overnight.'

Denton contradicted me straight away. 'The presence of uranium here would be ... geological nonsense.'

I glared at her. 'Oh, go back to school.' Denton seemed to shrink a little at my words. Good. You make eyes at my husband and see where it gets you.

Tanner stepped into the gap. 'The chance of finding uranium deposits in these mountains is highly unlikely. I mean, if it were here, someone would have noticed it already, surely.'

I frowned. 'What if it's not uranium?'

Tanner shrugged. 'What else would draw soldiers here?' 'Sexy girls? Free guns? Cheap beer? Drugs? Admittedly none of these are detectable by their gamma particle emissions but. . .' I stopped. No one was laughing.

Jason sighed impatiently. 'Allen told me the flood was coming. He said,

"Ararat is the door and Mahser Dagi is the key." What do you suppose he meant by that?"

I scowled. 'He's dead Jason. How the hell should I know?" I didn't want an answer but I got one anyway.

'Why are you annoyed at me?'

I sighed. 'Jason, two of my mates have been shot. I've been shot. I've killed someone. My favourite paintbrush is covered in blood. I'm annoyed at you because I wanted a cuddle."

Surprise edged his voice. I should have expected it. 'Why didn't you ask?"

'Why didn't you offer?"

'I thought you were the feminist here."

'There's a time to be liberated and there's a time to be hugged."

I could hear the surprise turning to hurt in his voice. 'Oh right. And I'm supposed to know the difference, am I?"

'For crying out loud; Jason. You're my husband. For better or worse remember?" I added, sharply, 'It's your job to anticipate my needs and support me.'

'Actually I thought that was something we were both supposed to do. For each other."

'Oh for crying out loud, stop splitting hairs. If you don't love me just bloody well say so and we'll call it a day!"

He thought about that one for a while. Thought about it with loud, wheezing, snuffling noises.

'And stop bloody crying. I didn't marry a wet."

'I'm not crying because you hurt me. I'm crying because you're hurt."

'Well thank you for your concern."

'Oh what's the use. You're so wrapped up in yourself. You haven't got a clue about the way I feel." He got up off the rock and mooched away, hands thrust into pockets.

'Jason!"

'Oh bugger off."

I struggled to my feet, shook off Tanner's helping hands, lurched after Jason. When I grabbed his shoulder it was as much to steady myself as it was to turn him around. 'No I won't "bugger off". Now stop acting like a spoilt schoolboy and shut up because -'

'- you're getting fed up with all my whining and moping? Sod you Bernice Summerfield. You think what you like about me. I promised to love you but I never promised to be perfect. I'm not perfect. If you didn't want me as I am then you shouldn't have bloody well married me!"

God, my side was killing me. 'That's not fair!" 'It never is when you're wrong."

'That's not fair either!"

'Thank you for making my point." 'Oh bugger you then."

'Well thank you for dragging this down to the level of the gutter."

'Yes, well, judging by the amount of time you spent in them I'd have thought you'd feel right at home!"

I was being unfair and I knew it. But something stopped me taking it back.

Instead I took Jason's arm. He struggled. 'Get off me!'

'Don't worry, I don't want your body." I let my hand slide down into his. It felt warm and strong. So much stronger than his personality. The rings the Doctor had given us clinked together. I felt something pass through me then, had a sense that the rings were alive. That they had touched and become more than the sum of their parts; Like people in love.

Jason stopped struggling then. He felt it too. His gaze locked on mine.

I brought his hand up to my lips as if to kiss it. 'Shazam,' I whispered.

There was a moment. Something happened between us then. I don't know what it was. I couldn't bear it.

I let his hand go. The tingling sensation passed through me. I had a sense of time rushing past, unstoppable, like lightning, earthing itself in the present moment, the now. I felt a jolt, like electricity. For a moment the world flickered into monochrome - then leapt back into

full colour and startling clarity.

I answered his unspoken question. 'Now we wait for the genie to appear.'

I felt good, as if I had slept for a week, and I could tell he did too. But there was a balance. Because I also felt we had reached some sort of crossroads in our lives - and by using the rings I had set us off on different paths, not just from each other, but from the path we were supposed to take. It was as though I had made us come unstuck in time.

Jason felt that too. His gaze held mine. I was surprised at the strength there, the eyes, still dark-rimmed, raw and sleepless, but sexy nonetheless, now full of energy.

And bitter accusation. 'You asked for help., 'So?'

'I don't need his help.'

I felt a fresh surge of anger course through me. 'Jason Kane are you -'

'No I am not jealous!'

'- the only person on this mountain who's in trouble?' I finished calmly.

He said nothing. Just scuffed his shoes in embarrassment. 'Good. Now shut up and sit down. If the soldiers find us before the Doctor does we're buggered. Big time.'

He shut up but I knew he was right. I had asked for help. I had called down the whirlwind.

I dragged in a few gulps of air. My side still felt like someone had poured acid all over it but at least I no longer had the feeling my insides were falling out. And even that discomfort was fading.

It was the rings. Why had I never thought about them before? Why had I never considered what properties they may be invested with? Was my ring exerting a pressure over me simply by virtue of my wearing it? Why had I never taken it off? There was a circle of dirty skin under that ring where I had never washed. Now I became aware that it itched horribly from time to time, but that this had never seemed to bother me until now.

Why had I never thought about the rings before? Was it truly because we had no need of them? No need of help? Or was it because even dormant they seemed so much like eyes you simply didn't want opened? The eyes of the Universe made manifest, watching you, judging you.

That was the closest I have come for many years to agreeing with Jason.

He felt it too. He knew the feeling was right.

What had I done?

But I knew the answer to that: I had called down the whirlwind and now it was coming, and we were standing right in its path, and so was the Earth.

I walked slowly back to the group humming 'Don't fear the Reaper'

nervously under my breath. My thoughts were a tumbled mess that needed sorting out. I felt the past collide with the future and gang up on the present.

It was a feeling I hadn't had since I last saw him, and it made me feel both scared and elated.

Jason lagged behind, staring up at the clouds, humming that stupid little Pepsi Cola jingle, which he does whenever he is thinking hard about something. Or trying to.

I don't think he wanted to walk with me. I'm almost certain he didn't. I didn't feel angry with him any more but I certainly wasn't going to mollycoddle him. We had things to do before he arrived.

I arrived back at the camp to mixed reactions.

When Sam Denton glanced curiously at my no doubt sprightly step I avoided her obvious question by sending her to fetch Jason. She gave me a peculiar glance. Hah. Don't push your luck girlie. You should thank me.

Schofield was sitting hunched on the ground, resting, ignoring everyone.

That was absolutely fine by me.

Tanner was more perceptive. She noticed something had happened to-

me straight away. I suppose it couldn't have been more obvious. Even I felt it.

The aftermath of the ring's effect was running in me like a fever in reverse.

My back was straighter, my tiredness gone. My skin felt stretched taut over a body stiff with energy. I was one good feeling piled on top of another and it was as easy to see the change as it was to feel it.

I started talking fast. I didn't know how long the effect would last, or what the cost would be later.

'Right. There are things we have to do. We have to work out what these soldiers want. We have to find out what they've done with Bill Raelsen and the others. We have to rescue them if they're still alive. And we have to make damn sure all our data comes with them. We can't let these soldiers have anything.'

Tanner thought about that and then asked the most perceptive question I had heard anyone ask so far: 'Why are there soldiers on both mountains?'

'That's not a question I've overlooked.' 'So what about it then?'

'Just because I've thought about it doesn't mean I have an answer.' A thought struck me then. I realized something had been bugging me about Jason's story. I walked over to where he and Denton were talking. Both of them looked as guilty as hell when I approached. Denton took a little half-step backwards. Oh dear. How predictable. Jason looked at me, defiance stamped all over his face. Far too much defiance.

I said, 'Jim's lump of moonrock. Let me have it, will you?'

He seemed almost relieved as he handed it over.

I rummaged around in my bag and pulled out the spectroscope.

Jason pointed. 'That's his.'

I smiled humourlessly. 'It's like being married. "What's his is mine, what's mine's me own."' I stared at Denton as I said this. She got the point but the one half-step she'd already taken was all she was going to back down. Fair enough.

I studied the moonrock. It was grey, streaked with black, grainy in texture; just a lump of rock that I held in my hand, yet it was part of another planet.

Moments like this were what it was all about.

I scanned it. Oops.

Take it all back Bernice.

Jason must have seen my expression change - either that or the spillover from the rings still linked us somewhat. 'What?'

'Remember how I said those drogue stones were six billion years old and came from somewhere outside the Solar System?'

'Yeah.'

'Well so did this.' I held up the moonrock, dropped it back into Jason's hand. 'They're the same stuff.'

Tanner came up to us. 'Did you hear it?' 'Hear what?'

'Sshhh!'

For a moment all was quiet. Then something lifted above the drone of the wind. An engine. An aeroplane.

'Is it him?'

I looked up. 'Not unless he's brought the whole Turkish Army with him.'

The sky was full of dark splotches, black on umber clouds, drifting through the sky, moving against the wind. Parachutes. About thirty of them.

I swore.

'We've got company.'

That was true in more ways than one.

All of us heard the next sound to break the silence. Footsteps.

I turned. There was no time for panic to grip me. No time to hide. The image of a gun rammed against my face swam before my eyes.

We waited for the slow, deliberate footsteps to bring whoever it was into view.

Someone came round a jut of rock. I heard breath rasp in someone's chest.

I felt my fists clench, remembered how it had felt to ram my paintbrush into a human eye.

The footsteps stopped.

A voice whispered, 'Pretty view, Benny.' I almost yelped with relief.

It was Dilaver.

He fell to the ground as I ran towards him.

I scraped some moisture from a hollow in a nearby rock and wiped the boy's face. Wisely, he refused to drink.

He was exhausted, bleeding from scrapes to his face and hands. The Paul Weller portrait on his jacket - twin to the one on his crash helmet - had almost rubbed away. He jerked when I touched him; peeling back his jacket I saw bruises spreading across his chest and upper arms. I couldn't tell, but thought one of his ribs might be broken.

'Bastard.' Someone had worked him over. Who did this to you?'

'Soldiers. Iraqis.'

The questions came thick and fast then. Even Schofield joined in nervously.

What were they doing? Are you sure they were Iraqis and not Iranians?

How did you escape? How long have you been walking? Are they following you?

I flapped a hand to shut them up. 'He needs to rest.' Schofield said sharply,

'If we let him rest and he's being followed we could all be killed.'

I scowled. Much as I wanted to kick the historian for his insensitivity, I had to agree with him. In my book it was brains, not brawn, which won the war.

We needed intelligence; Dilaver could provide it. , But there was something we needed more than that. 'We need to find cover. A cave. Somewhere to hide. In about two minutes this mountainside is going to be crawling with soldiers burying their parachutes. We'll look like right charlies if one of them lands on top of us and sounds the alarm.'

Even Schofield didn't argue with that. We started to look for somewhere to hide.

We found it nearby in the shape of a tiny box canyon, more of an open-roofed cave really, whose entrance had been partially concealed by a slide of rocks in the not too distant past.

We carried Dilaver there, made him as comfortable as we could on a blanket of coats and listened as, in a painful whisper, he told us what had happened back at the camp.

His story did not differ substantially from Jason's. When Dot and Reefer and I had been shot, Dilaver had hidden himself in the rocks nearby.

Realizing his best hope for escape was to move while the soldier was still examining the bodies, he had crept silently away. Thus he had failed to see me kill the soldier.

He crept back to the main camp site to get help - only to discover the camp was under armed guard. He didn't know if anyone had been killed - he didn't think so - but then he couldn't see anyone alive either. Well, anyone that wasn't a soldier. The soldiers had taken over the camp, gathered together all the computers, pads, anything that a note or a memo could be scrawled on. And others were quartering the surrounding ground thoroughly with hand-held devices I recognized from his description to be Geiger counters.

He had lain low until dark, then circled the camp to where several tents had been erected, planning to find out if anyone was left alive. But he was spotted by a sentry. He had turned and run, followed by soldiers with guns.

They hadn't shot him; he was only a kid. They thought he would be easy to recapture. But when he had caught one soldier in the eye with a thrown rock the others had decided he needed to be taught a lesson.

The men were brutal; their commanding officer was worse. From his description, he was a colonel. His name was Samran.

The lesson quickly got out of hand.

The soldiers beat Dilaver senseless and, at Samran's orders, left him to die.

But the kid was tougher than they thought. He lay unconscious for several hours. When he awoke he knew he had to get off the mountain. He had followed a search party sent out to look for the soldier I had killed - and that's when he had realized I was still alive. So he had come to find me.

Bless his heart; he knew neither of us would survive alone. Well, he knew I wouldn't. Even injured as he was, he could have got off the mountain and escaped - but he came after me instead.

Dilaver finished his story and there was silence. I didn't know what to say. I thought about giving him a big hug and then remembered all those bruises covering his chest.

'Dilaver, my lad, you're an absolute star and I owe you one. Big time,' I whispered.

He managed a grin. 'Beg pardon?'

I couldn't help laughing quietly. Dilaver joined in, though I could see how much it hurt. I was about to try to find out exactly how much information he had about the soldiers' equipment and movements, when I was interrupted by the sound of footsteps crunching outside the box canyon.

We fell silent and listened.

The footsteps crunched softly over the ground. Rocks slipped and clacked.

There was a rustling noise, as of folding cloth. Then a scraping sound, as if someone were brushing dirt and small stones together. You didn't need to be a genius to figure out what was going on. One of the soldiers was burying his parachute.

Then the noises stopped. Suddenly. As if -

I suddenly went cold. I grabbed Jason and pulled him close. 'Where's my paintbrush?' I hissed.

His silence was answer enough.

He'd left it outside. He might as well have painted a bloody sign: ENEMY

AGENTS THIS WAY. PLEASE COME AND SHOOT US.

The silence continued.

I had to find out what was happening. What the soldier was doing. Holding my bag as forlorn protection should the worst come to the worst, I crept to the entrance to the canyon and peered out. I found out what the soldier was doing almost immediately: he was following our footprints.

I tried to duck back but it was too late. He looked up and our eyes met. He was about three yards away. He covered his surprise by trying to kill me.

The knife he threw thudded into my bag with enough force to knock me over.

I gripped the knife hilt as I fell over and played dead.

I sucked in a couple of breaths, wriggled a bit, under cover of which I wrenched the knife free of the bag, then I slumped flat against the ground and tried to look as much like a corpse as I could.

I waited. Nothing. Come on. Come and check me out.

I gripped the knife hilt, held it against my body. I tensed myself to shove it upwards at the slightest touch.

Come on. I'm just a dead body. And a woman at that. Nothing happened.

I can't hurt you. I'm dead. See? I'm not even breathing. Now come on over here and get your damn knife you son of a

Someone touched me.

I sprang to my feet, whirled, slashed with the knife. It was hardly an expert move but it would gain me some time. A few seconds to leap, to drive the point home and then -

'Benny what the hell are you doing!' I swore.

Jason.

I sucked in a breath, tried to control the shakes. 'Where's the Soldier?'

'He's gone.' 'He'll be back.' 'What do you mean? He thinks you're dead.'

'He didn't retrieve his knife. He knew there could be others about. He's gone to get the others.'

'He'll be ages then.'

I almost screamed, 'Haven't you ever heard of radios? And compasses?'

'Oh.

'Yes, "Oh"!' I sighed. 'We have to get out of here. Now. Get the others.'

We ran.

Well, we stumbled, we fell, we swore. But we moved. Dilaver lead us through the night. I didn't know where he was going and I didn't ask. I don't know how he managed to put one foot in front of the other. It seemed impossible. He did it anyway.

As we ran I thought of the people we were leaving behind. I thought of Raelsen. Was he alive or dead? I asked myself that question over and over again until I fell and almost broke my ankle.

I stopped wondering then and thought seriously about looking where I was going. I accepted Tanner's helping hand, and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other in a frantic limp.

After twenty minutes Dilaver stopped. We all but bumped into him in the darkness.

Nobody spoke. Nobody needed to.

There were voices. Gruff, male voices. Soldiers. One issued orders in a quiet voice.

Soldiers.

We had practically run into them.

'They must be following us.' That was Jason; fear edged his voice. Never mind, dear. I'm sure Denton will give you a hug.

I told him to shut up.

Dilaver moved backwards away from the voices. He began to circle the spot where the soldiers were. That wasn't easy because they were obviously moving forwards.

A thought struck me. There seemed to be more voices than those of the four soldiers Jason had described. What if Tammuz had called up reinforcements?

I suddenly remembered something Tanner had said earlier: 'Why are there soldiers on both mountains?'

It all clicked together.

The mountains were linked. The sites were linked. Both sets of soldiers had Geiger counters. Their actions had been identical. Whatever her affection for Jason, Denton was right about the nature of the geological formations here. Finding uranium on one mountain, let alone two, was about as likely as my growing wings.

This wasn't about uranium. Whether they realized it or not.

I thought that one through in a heartbeat. The answer was obvious; ironic and terrifying. Both forces were going to try to occupy each other's site.

And we were caught in the middle.

Dilaver yelped suddenly. The yelp was followed by the soft punch of a silenced gunshot. The sound of running footsteps stopped abruptly, in a sound like someone dropping a sack of vegetables.

Then nothing.

I stood quite still. I felt nothing. I was numb. Some part of me knew Dilaver was dead. Far away streaks of grey crept across the sky. Dawn was coming. Would it find us dead on this mountainside? Would it find me dead here?

Shapes emerged from the pre-dawn gloom. Soldiers. With guns. The soldiers pointed the guns at us.

'Benny!'

Jason turned to run. I reached out to grab him as guns shifted to cover us.

'Shut up, Jason. Keep still and shut up. Maybe they won't kill us.'

He shut up. It was a small victory. Getting out of this one seemed unlikely.

Denton, Schofield and Tanner pressed close. I saw Dilaver huddled nearby on the ground. He groaned, twisted.

We waited.

One of the figures said, 'Kneel down. Do not move. I do not want to kill you.' I recognised him from Jason's description.

Tammuz.

Tanner looked at me.

'Do as he says.'

We knelt.

Tammuz moved closer to us. He seemed on the point of speaking again when a shot punched the air and the soldier standing next to him fell over.

Immediately Tammuz and the others dived for cover.

I turned. More soldiers, grey shapes in the misty dawn, were clambering over the rocks.

Iraqis.

Samran.

A blood-red sun hoisted itself over the rocks.

The black insect shape of a military helicopter hung before it, rotors shredding the fog, black smoke coughing from its exhausts, weapons pods deployed and facing us.

'It never rains but it bloody pours,' I whispered.

No one laughed.

I grabbed Jason and threw him to the ground as the soldiers opened fire.

The battle took place in eerie half-silence.

Bullets chopped the air over our heads. Soldiers leapt from the rocks, ran through the fog. Metal clinked. Boots smacked against the rocks. Every so often a soldier would be hit and would fall. One, wounded but not killed outright, lay rolling on the ground about twenty feet away. The sound of his groans, muffled by the fog, became a constant backdrop to the action.

There were no other voices. No shouts. No orders.

A puff of dirt hit me in the face as a bullet hit the ground about three feet in front of me.

The bullet was followed by a set of boots.

Why didn't anyone shoot us?

I knew the answer to that one. We had no guns. And we were needed alive by both sides.

Something exploded nearby. Beside. me Jason flinched.

I wriggled to him and pressed his face against the ground. 'Shut up and keep still!'

Another explosion. A whole series, getting louder. Closer.

No. Not explosions.

Backfires.

An image of Sven waving from the cockpit of his chopper as he sprayed me with sheepshit swam before my eyes.

Backfires.

I was on my feet in an instant, grabbing Jason, dragging him up, kicking the others, screaming. 'Get up. Get up! It's him! He's come for us! He's in the chopper! Come on, move it!'

We ran through fog, drenched in ruddy morning sunlight, bullets tugging at our hair and clothes.

The fog tore apart in front of us.

The chopper hovered a hundred yards away. Bullets whined, cracked against the rocks.

I could hear voices now, shouting orders.

The chopper moved closer, hugging the ground, blasting dust and grit into the air.

We ran.

The soldiers ran too.

Something tugged at my sleeve. I spun round. Schofield was falling. I grabbed him, pulled him upright, staggered on. Then we were at the chopper. Jason and Tanner were already aboard. I saw Jason waving from the hatch. Sven was beside him. And a tall figure that must have been Chris Cwej. I grinned at the big lunk. Boy, was he going to get a hug and a half!

A figure waved impatiently from the cockpit. There he was, one hand holding his damn hat on, the other on the joystick, a cheerful grin splitting his ageless face.

The Doctor.

He yelled something, waved me on.

I shoved Schofield up towards the hatch. Chris grabbed him and straight-armed him off the ground. That boy could have been born a crane.

A bullet whined off the fuselage, scattering sparks into the wind. I had one hand on the undercarriage ready to haul myself aboard when I remembered Dilaver.

I let go.

Chris yelled something I couldn't hear.

I screamed, 'He came back for me! The kid came back for me and I'm not going to leave him behind now!'

Chris was still yelling but the wind and the thudding of bullets against the airframe made nonsense of his words. Then I was running back the way I had come.

Back across the battlefield to get Dilaver.

They caught me of course. I had one arm around the boy and was lifting him when I felt a gun press against the back of my neck.

The gun kept pushing until I was forced to kneel.

I knelt, cradling Dilaver against me as the fog blew away. The firefight had stopped now. The ground was littered with soldiers.

Fifty feet away a soldier was groaning as he rolled on the ground. I heard a shot. The groans stopped.

I didn't turn.

I knew who had me at gunpoint. Dilaver's description was more than adequate.

Samran.

I wondered if the others had got away. That question was answered as the sound of a chopper engine shattered the morning air. I looked up, shielding my eyes as grit blasted around me. I saw him in the cockpit. Hat still precisely placed, eyes narrowed. The chopper was almost close enough to touch.

I felt the gun press into my neck.

I saw his eyes widen as he saw me. Saw the man with the gun at my head.

The chopper banked left, began to circle. I felt myself pulled around to face it. The chopper stopped.

So did I.

As a standoff it was a classic. Me on my knees with an injured boy in my arms and Samran's gun at my head, the Doctor in the chopper, weapons pods facing us at point-blank range. James Cameron eat your heart out.

Then the pressure on my neck eased. There was a shot. Sparks whined off the chopper's canopy. The Doctor didn't blink. He just stared at me. I saw his eyes. They were locked on mine. He moved the joystick. The chopper dipped its nose, plunged towards us, rotors smacking the air and churning the ground into a storm of loose trash.

Samran fired again.

Sparks flew. Glass cracked. The chopper came on. His eyes held mine.

He wasn't going to stop until I was on that chopper. Another shot.

Samran wasn't going to stop either.

The chopper moved closer. Grit tore at my face.

Samran shifted his aim to the rotors.

The chopper stopped its forward movement, hovered nose down, an animal deciding whether to pounce.

Samran fired.

Smoke exploded from the exhaust as the chopper banked left, grazed a shoulder of rock, and tore off into the dawn. I watched it vanish into the sun. The wind died. After a moment Samran poked me with the gun and I got up.

I hugged Dilaver closer to me. I knew he was dead.

I just couldn't bear to let him go.

***

Chapter 6

'Bernice!'

I called out her name as the chopper struck upwards from the mountainside, thrashed its way through the morning thermals. I jumped back towards the open hatch. Chris slammed it shut in my face and shoved me effortlessly back into a set of safety webbing. I was screaming at him.

'We left. Her. We left her behind, we have to go back, we -'

Chris fastened the safety webbing around me. Denton leant closer and took my hand.

I yelled and twisted in the harness.

Both of them ignored me. They probably couldn't hear me over the noise of the engine. Chris looked sympathetic. That look brought back too many memories from before my marriage. I couldn't bear it. I looked away, out of a small window beside me.

I caught a frantic glimpse of sky and rocky mountainside. The sun flashed through a pall of fog. Black smoke billowed in the down draft from the rotors and that dragged my gaze back to the ground, to Bernice kneeling there, to Samran, with the gun at her head.

Then we were up through the fog and she was gone.

We reached Dogubayazit in fifteen minutes. It was the worst quarter of an hour of my life. I couldn't get the image of Bernice out of my head. Of her kneeling on the ground with Dilaver in her arms and Samran holding a gun to her head.

I didn't even know if she was dead or alive.

By the time we arrived on the outskirts of the village I felt the world was beating me to death. The chopper didn't just land. It slapped the ground, bounced, rolled, hit a big rock, bounced, settled again. By the time we stopped, I felt as if someone had repeatedly smashed me in the small of the back with a large mallet, and someone else had got hold of my head and was squeezing it. Hard. I was hoarse from screaming. No one heard a word over the engine noise.

I was first out of the chopper. Sod the rest of them; I had something to

say.

I scooted around to the pilot's hatch, wind from the rotors blowing dust up at my face.

The cockpit was empty. He wasn't there.

A hand touched my shoulder. I spun round, temper at bursting point. It was Chris. The look on his face was humiliatingly sympathetic. Behind him I could see the others limping through a barren field towards the outskirts of the village. The Doctor was nowhere in sight.

Chris started to say something. It sounded like an apology. I didn't want to listen. 'Where is he?'

'The Doctor?'

'No, the Pope you idiot! Of course I mean the Doctor. Where is he?' I was babbling but couldn't stop myself. 'I knew we didn't need him, but she didn't listen to me, the stupid bitch, oh no, not me, I'm only her husband! We didn't need him and he came anyway and now he's left her behind and she's probably dead and -'

Chris put a hand on my shoulder. The hand completely covered it. 'You'd all be dead if it weren't for him.'

I grabbed his wrist and flung the limb away from me. I might as well have punched a brick wall. 'How the hell do you expect me to respond to that?

Why do you even think it makes a difference?'

He didn't answer right away. He seemed puzzled. Got you. I turned away, vaguely aware of another figure approaching. The Doctor? No. This man was tall and thin, dressed in

battered flying leathers, a purple bobble hat and dark-blue Wellington boots. He was staring not at us but at the aircraft. 'You hef brought her back, my lovely helicopter, my good friend Chris Cwej, yes?'

Chris sighed. 'Yes, Sven. We promised you her back and here she is. Safe and sound.'

But Sven had seen the damage caused by Samran's bullets. 'Not so safe and sound, I think. I think you tell the porkies to me Chris Cwej. I think you hef been mistreating my best girl and I think you owe me

great amounts of money to fix.'

Chris sighed. 'The Doctor will pay you anything you want.'

Sven looked like he was about to try to get a better deal when I said, 'Is this chopper yours?'

'Of course is mine! Who else but me appreciate fine craftsmanship of this quality?' He patted the canopy proudly. A piece of glass fell out and broke with a tinkle.

'Good. Now, I want you to take me back to Mahser Dagi. We'll need to go right now, because there's someone there and we need to rescue her.'

Sven looked interested. 'Lady professor?'

I sighed impatiently. 'Yes, lady professor, now if you'll just -'

Sven looked sternly at Chris. 'Lady professor? You leave?'

Chris looked really embarrassed. 'Er, well, it wasn't quite as -'

'We cannot leave. By Gott. Must go fetch.'

'I know that!' I said. 'The only question I need to know is how long?'

Sven shrugged? 'One hour to refuel.'

'Only an hour? I can live with that.'

'And …' he thought it over. 'I charge five thousand American dollars to fly.'

A jet screamed overhead at high altitude. Sven looked up, sucked thoughtfully on his lower lip. 'Ten thousand American dollars.'

I threw up my hands. 'Fine. Whatever.' I got out my wallet and showed him my AmEx card.

He frowned apologetically? 'Cash only.'

My head felt like it was going to explode. 'I don't have any cash.'

Sven looked puzzled. 'No cash, you hef?

'No! That's right! No bloody cash I bloody hef Are you deaf?' I

screamed.

Sven said, calmly, 'Lady professor, cannot leave?'

'Of course we can't leave her there! She's my wife, for crying out loud!'

'Lady professor? Your wife she is?'

'Yes.'

'Married you are?'

'Yes.'

'Husband you are?'

'Yes!'

Suddenly Sven looked very nervous. He seemed unable to meet my gaze.

He sidled away, ducked under the airframe and began to check the fuselage for damage.

I stared at Chris in desperation. 'Can you fly this bucket of junk?' I kicked the nose wheel of the helicopter. Sven yelped in protest but I ignored him.

Chris shrugged. 'I expect so.'

'Well, then, you can just get right back in the damn cockpit and-'

Chris shook his head. The sympathetic look became even more sympathetic. 'Sven's right. There's not enough fuel. And we have to fix the damage. By the feel of it one of those bullets nicked a rotor. We were lucky to make it back in one piece.'

Sven heard the words bullet and rotor in the same sentence and immediately began to climb over the airframe, poking his bony fingers into bullet holes, groaning and generally muttering about the cost of damages.

I stared at Chris. I couldn't believe I was hearing this? 'She's back there!

She might be dead and you're worrying about a nicked rotor? The thing got us here - it can damn well get us back! You were her friend!

My God, how could you let him do this to her?'

From the airframe, Sven ran a hand tenderly over more damage and muttered, 'By Gott, how could you let him do this to her?'

Chris looked from me to Sven and back to me again. He seemed unsure which of the two identical questions to answer first.

'Well?' I insisted, determined to get Chris to agree with me at the very least.

Chris sighed. 'Look, I know it's hard, but you just have to -'

'No! No I don't, all right? I don't "have to" anything. God Almighty, Chris, I've ... We have to go back. We just have to. OK? We just have to!'

By now I was kicking the nose wheel and bashing the airframe with my bunched fists. Neither did any good. Sven had retreated in abject fear to the rotor housing and was making soothing noises while stroking the idle blades.

Chris gathered up both my fists in one of his. 'The more you damage the chopper the longer it'll be before we can go back.' I struggled to get my hands free. No chance. I swore. I swore louder when I realized I couldn't free myself from his grip. I kicked the nose wheel again. He tugged gently. I flew away from the chopper and sat down on the ground about ten feet away.

He grinned sheepishly. 'Oops. Don't know my own strength sometimes.

Sorry.'

I struggled to stand up, then lost my balance and fell over again. I began to get an idea of how tired I was. And how hungry. And thirsty. Don't misunderstand me. I was still just as angry. I was mad as hell. But those other feelings - once you realized they were there, you couldn't ignore them.

Chris helped me up. 'You want me to carry you?'

Chris could probably carry two people my weight while jogging up a mountain. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

He shrugged. 'I won't if you won't.'

I said bitterly, 'If you won't help me get back out there, you can just

leave me alone.'

I struggled to my feet and started to follow the others towards the village. I got all of ten steps before losing my balance. I managed to preserve my dignity enough to sit, rattler than fall, but that was where my effort ended.

Chris loped towards me. 'Come on. You do need my help.'

'I'd rather sit here and rot.'

The shadow of a frown crossed Cwej's face. It was the nearest I'd ever seen him to being angry. .'Don't be like that, Jason. The Doctor knows what he's doing, I'm sure. Now come on. Let me help you.'

He waited. Eventually I nodded, mumbled assent. 'That's better.' He put his arm round me and lifted.

I swore as he helped me to my feet. I swore as he all but picked me up in his arms. I swore every step of the way back to the village.

Chris just grinned.

I trudged through the village and arrived back at the hotel leaning like some old woman on Chris's arm. Children followed us every step of the way?

Some pointed at us. All of them giggled. One little girl wore the hair slide that I'd given Bernice on our wedding night. I thought I'd felt bad up until then; seeing that hair slide just 'made me feel very much worse.

There was a crowd of people at the hotel. Village men, some women.

There seemed to be a tremendous fuss going on. Of course. The hotel was run by Dilaver's family. They knew he was still out there - with Bernice. How would we tell them he might be dead?

The women all moved around very efficiently preparing food and clean clothing and making beds, while the men sat around outside in deckchairs, shouting and waving their arms aggressively. I didn't need a universal translator to know what they were thinking. They were angry. Angry at the soldiers who had invaded their mountain. Well, God's mountain. They wanted to go off and do something about it.

The Doctor was at the hotel. He'd been there for ages - at least that's

what it seemed like. He seemed to be best friends with half the villagers there -

and on speaking terms at least with the rest. He seemed to find no difficulty whatsoever in being in several places at once. Helping the women out with the food, distracting the children, calming the men. I even saw him making a bed.

I'd once been stranded with Bernice in South Africa when a number of villages had been struck by an outbreak of Ebola. Filoviruses are nasty things. They'll kill you in a week: melt your insides until your connective tissue dissolves and you turn into a big sack of virally active organic slush.

It scared the hell out of me. The hospital at Mulobizi was a mess of infected villagers and doctors in blood spattered white coats and masks trying to make hopelessly inadequate medical supplies stretch to more than a hundred people we all knew were going to die anyway.

That's what the Doctor reminded me of: all those whitecoated figures running around from one job to the next, frantic but orderly, calm yet desperate, all at the same time. There was a sense of impending doom about his actions. As if it was all ultimately futile. As if whatever was coming was unstoppable and whatever we all did was going to make no difference at all in the long run.

As Chris and I arrived the Doctor had just interrupted arbitrating a game of hopscotch in order to placate Dilaver's uncle, who was waving a Russian semi-automatic rifle over his head like a club and trying to stir up the other villagers to storm the mountainside. The Doctor disarmed him with such speed and charm that the others could only blink stupidly; then he was back playing hopscotch with the kids again, chalking lines on the ground and hopping about with ludicrous gusto?

I stopped beside the children. The Doctor looked up. I was about to give him a piece of my mind when Chris took me by the arm and practically yanked it out of its socket pulling me away.

'Later,' he hissed. 'The Doctor's busy now.'

'Oh really? Playing Jake-the-Peg with a Russian semiautomatic and a bunch of kids?'

Chris said nothing.

The Doctor glanced at me for a second before returning his attention to the kids. 'You're not the only one who's scared,' he said quietly.

I wanted to yell, to stamp my feet, to bash him with that bloody Russian gun. He and Benny had been friends for ages - how could he abandon her like this?

I said nothing. This of course made me feel more like a coward than ever. I tried to put aside my guilt as we followed the others through the hotel to where the women were laying out buckets of water and soap, rough towelling and clean clothes. I heard them talking about the Doctor - and using the word dervish to describe him.

Dervish.

The whirlwind.

For some reason that made me shiver.

Maybe I'd ask the Doctor about Benny later. I told myself that if he wasn't worried then maybe it would all work out all right after all. And anyway, I always think better after a bath.

I had to wait for the bath; that was OK. I hit the bar, grabbed a warm Pepsi and a deckchair and stretched out. I didn't quite go to sleep. I seem to remember Chris sitting beside me at one point. I seem to remember him asking me to tell him what happened out there on the mountain. I don't remember being angry at him, the way I had been. What the hell - you can't stay mad at someone forever, right?

I told him everything I could remember and was on the point of going back to my room for a kip when Sam Denton came in looking deliciously scrubbed and told me the bathroom was free?

The bathroom was on the ground floor - makes sense when you're humping buckets of water I suppose. The water was lukewarm, but nonetheless refreshing. I yelped as I got in. My muscles were beginning to unknot themselves from the last three days' activity and stress.

I found some of Benny's shower gel on a shelf by the bath and tipped a handful into the water. I suppose using her gel should have made me feel even more guilty about leaving her behind. For some reason it didn't. It was as if I'd gone numb, right in my heart. As if there were no feelings there any more. I wondered about this for a while. In the end the scent of bath gel and the sensation of lukewarm water drove

everything from my mind.

I sank down into the tub, as far as I could manage, and closed my eyes. I let the wash of sound - of women muttering about food or arguing, the shouts of the men, the gleeful yelps of the children and the constant jabber of radios - melt into a soothing backdrop of white noise.

Eyes closed, I hunted for the soap.

Voices muttered, pots clanged, dogs barked.

I found the soap.

One voice seemed to be a little louder than the others. It ' seemed very clear although the words were somehow indistinct. It seemed to be asking me questions.

Ah well. That wouldn't hurt. Would it? I took the (pen)

soap in one hand and the

(paper)

flannel the Doctor gave me in the other and began to (write)

scrub.

I washed quickly but thoroughly? After a few minutes I opened my eyes. I was aware someone was in the room with me. Someone with shiny rings piercing her eyebrows.

'Hello, Sam,' I said.

'Hi.'

A little silence. She played with a damp strand of hair. 'You've been in here ages. I thought you might have drowned.'

I shivered suddenly. She was right. The bathwater was cold. Had I fallen asleep?

'What are you smiling at?'

She was right. I was smiling. 'Your hair looks daft when it's all wet.'

'All bedraggled, right?'

'Um. It should be spiky.'

She laughed. It was a small sound, lost even in this small room. I didn't say anything. She didn't either.

A minute or two went by.

Then she said, 'I've come to ... er ... well, look, right, the thing is, the Doctor sent me in here to get your notes.'

I sat up in astonishment. 'Notes? What notes? What do you mean?'

Denton pointed at the foot of the bath. A pile of handwritten papers was neatly stacked there. 'Your notes. The Doctor wants them. If that's OK.'

I grabbed the notes and flipped through them. They seemed familiar somehow ... I thought a moment. That was it. They were the notes Allen had given me just before he had died. Then I looked' closer. Something was different about them. They weren't the same notes at all. They were copies.

In my handwriting.

'Um,' I said. 'Er. Sure. Notes. Yeah. Right. Help yourself.' Denton nodded her thanks, grabbed the papers and left the room.

I shivered again, remembered flipping casually through the notes as Allen lay bleeding to death on the ground before me. How had I managed to -

No. That was the wrong question. Who had made me -

Someone else came into the bathroom then, doffed a hat, said with a smile,

'Hullo there, young man. Just come for my - ah! There it is.' A hand reached out to pluck a marker pen from the soap dish. 'Thanks. Bye!'

He was gone.

'Doctor? What do you think you're -'

A riffling of papers, an interested clucking of tongue, then he was back, fingers slipping into one jacket pocket after another until he emerged with Jim Allen's piece of lucky moonrock. 'Ah. Yes. Um. Thought I might borrow this for a while. Thanks. Have a nice bath.'

I thought very seriously about getting up and going after him? I thought about yelling at him for leaving her there; making him go back and help her, at gunpoint if necessary. But I didn't do any of these things. Instead I scrunched further down into my cold bath and looked for the soap.

This time I kept my eyes open.

After the bath Iapeth - the pretty girl who had booked us into the hotel and who, incidentally, had made such a fuss about my cut - took away my dirty clothes to wash and provided me with a clean set? The trousers and shirt were plain cloth and slightly itchy - but they fitted much better and they felt a lot cooler than my own clothes. Even if I did feel like a foreigner. Then again, everyone was wearing them. I just fitted right in.

I went in search of Chris. I needed food. I needed a cup of tea. I needed a helicopter.

I found him on a mud porch, sitting on a deckchair under the Doctor's umbrella, fiddling with a laptop computer. One child, the small girl wearing Bernice's hair slide, sat crosslegged on the ground some yards away, watching solemnly. 'Chris,' I said as firmly as I could. 'Where's the Doctor?'

'Gone.'

'Gone? What do you mean, gone?'

Chris shrugged, pulled out a mobile phone, uncoiled a lead and connected it to the laptop. 'I mean gone. He got into the TARDIS and went.

Somewhere. Wouldn't tell me where.'

I couldn't believe it. 'And you don't think there's anything just a little odd about his stranding us all here like this?' Chris shrugged again? 'You know what he's like.'

'And you trust him?' ' 'Sure.'

'You're a big lunk.'

'And you're a scrawny runt? And you're in my light, by the way.'

I moved.

'Thanks.' He uncoiled another lead and plugged that into the phone.

'So what about it then?'

'What about what?' He connected the phone to the umbrella. 'Rescuing Bernice of course.'

'Ah.' He turned the parasol upside down and pointed it up at the sky. I realized the inside was lined with wire panels. The crook-shaped handle was semitransparent and contained a number of complicated-looking electronic circuits? 'Got something more important to do.'

I felt my temper rising. 'Like what?'

Chris touched the space bar a couple of times then input some commands.

He hit return and the laptop bleeped. Chris adjusted the angle of the umbrella.

'Like what?' I insisted angrily.

Chris smiled at me. 'Have you noticed how it's so much easier to be angry when he's not around?'

That stopped me cold.

Chris added thoughtfully, 'How it's so much easier to ask questions; you know, be yourself, when he's not around?'

I said nothing.

Chris input more commands into the laptop. 'What are you doing?' I asked after a moment. 'Well, I'm not tuning in to Channel Five.'

I felt a surge of anger. How could he make jokes when Bernice might be dead?

He must have sensed my anger. 'Sorry, Jason. It's like this: while you were having your bath, the Doctor came around waving a load of bits of paper.

He gave me the laptop, the modem, the -' he patted the umbrella stem ironically '- uplink antenna. With this little lot we can lock on to EOSAT II and bounce a signal halfway round the globe.' Chris grinned? 'I think he liked the idea of using one of NASA's own satellites to hack into their database.'

'Great.' I wasn't impressed. 'So you hack in, then what?'

'He said he wanted me to "investigate". "Investigate what?" I asked.

"Everything," he said.' Chris shrugged. 'So that's what I'm doing.'

I almost laughed at the absurdity of it. 'You're going to download the whole NASA database for the last half-century into this stupid little laptop?'

Chris frowned. 'This "stupid little laptop" is five hundred years ahead of its time. It could probably hold all the information currently in existence on this planet.'

I felt like laughing and screaming all at once. 'Downloading that much information will take forever. What about Bernice? She's still out there. God only knows what might be happening to her! She could be dead or ... or anything!'

Chris spread his hands, put them on my shoulders. 'I'm just as worried about Benny as you are. Now look. Sven is fixing the chopper. It'll be ready soon. As soon as this data download is complete and we run an analysis on it we can -'

I shook my head. 'No, Chris. No. It's not good enough.' I bit my lip. 'This is his doing. You know it isn't right. We have to go back for her. As soon as the chopper is ready.' 'Nobody else can interpret the data -'

'Rubbish! Denton can interpret the data - Tanner's got two degrees in statistics and maths! Don't give me that "Only you can save the world"

crap!'

Chris was about to respond when the laptop issued a continuous bleep. We both looked at it. Chris muttered something under his breath?

'What?'

'We've cracked the mainframe, slipped in past the main security systems.

But we need a password to get into Allen's files.' He sighed. 'I expect the program will be able to crack this as well but it looks like it'll take a while.'

'How long?'

'I don't know. Could be minutes. Could be hours?' 'And in the meantime Bernice is -'

He turned, suddenly. I jumped, expecting him to be angry. The expression on his face was sympathy. God, that made me mad. 'I know you're worried and I know you're scared. But it

won't help Benny if you get mad about things you can't change.'

'You mean things he says we can't change!' 'Look, you've got no idea what's at stake here.'

Chris's very calmness was infuriating. 'Oh no. Of course I haven't. Just Benny's life!'

Chris sighed. He stood up. The little girl who'd been watching us stood up too. Chris noticed her and said kindly, 'Don't you want to go and play with your friends?'

She shook her head silently.

'I think it would be a good idea.'

The little girl reached into a pocket of her dress and held something out to Chris. 'He said I could stay. He said you might need this.'

Chris reached out for the object. It was a book. No. It was a Filofax. Jim Allen's Filofax.

The little girl said, 'I took it from a bag in the motor car before you went to the mountains. I didn't mean to do anything bad. I was just interested.'

Chris sighed. He picked the girl up and bounced her on his shoulder. 'Little girl, I think you may just have saved my life. Among others.' He sat down in the deckchair, the child perched on the back of his neck, gripping double handfuls of his thick blond hair and grinning' madly. Chris began to input commands. Not as fast as I'd seen the Doctor operate a computer but fast nonetheless. I was ignored, both by him and the little girl.

'Password,' he muttered obsessively. 'Password, password, password.'

The little girl took up the chant as well. A few minutes passed.

Nothing.

I took the Filofax from him, held it out to the girl. 'Did he tell you about a special page?'

She smiled. Nodded.' Took the book. It fell open at a page held by a bookmark.

The page was empty.

Chris sighed. 'Back to the password program I suppose.' 'Maybe not.'

The little girl was holding out the bookmark. It was a cheap novelty thing: a thin strip of card cut into the shape of a houseboat at the top. The boat had windows. A giraffe was sticking its head out of one window.

Chris grinned. He tapped the bookmark. 'That's it.' He typed in: FLOOD.

Nothing.

In rapid succession he tried, DAY OF FLOOD, NOAH, ARK, DOVE, RAVEN, OLIVE, OLIVE BRANCH, ARARAT, MOUNTAIN and GOD.

Nothing.

Now it was my turn to grin. I had been looking at the little cardboard bookmark and I'd had an idea. I reached over his shoulder and typed: GIRAFE.

Nothing. I swore?

Then the little girl reached down and corrected my spelling. GIRAFFE.

It was like magic. The files opened up. A torrent of data surged across the screen, so fast I couldn't follow a tenth of it, downloading into the laptop's memory. The little machine bleeped almost constantly?

Chris was whirling the little girl around his head. Even I was smiling. Then I stopped, because I had a sudden picture of the Doctor, sitting in the TARDIS, maybe light years or centuries away, but still with that knowing expression I was coming to hate? He'd known this was going to happen.

He'd known because he'd set it all up. The kid. The Filofax. Me. Chris.

Benny.

He'd used us all?

No, worse than that: he made use of us all, our interests, our relationship, our presence here in Turkey. He'd used us the way ... the way Chris had used the laptop.

As if we were tools.

I rubbed the back of my neck. I was getting a headache.

I was getting angry again as well. Very angry.

Then I thought of even my anger being planned for and I became even more annoyed.

Chris put the girl down and she ran off to play. He leant over the laptop, fingers flicking at the keyboard.

He began to pull up files.

I let out a breath, tried to make my thoughts sound rational, sensible, convincing. 'Chris, the Doctor's just using us. He does it to everyone. I should know. I've done it myself. You must see that. Look, we have to go back for Bernice. It's important. To me.'

Chris smiled uneasily. I could almost see him backing off. It was as if he was scared of me? Like he was running away from something? The truth. I thought about my experiences on Deneb and found myself angry again?

What right did Chris have to treat me like a punter?

Chris shook his head, a little uneasily. He pointed at the laptop. 'I'm getting some important stuff here.'

'I don't care!' 'You should care.'

Despite myself I leant closer to study the files he had pulled up on to the screen.

The first showed a number of aerial photographs. 'Those look like the satellite photos Raelsen claimed showed the location of the Ark on Mahser Dagi.'

Chris shook his head? 'Uh huh. This is a NASA file. It was taken from a shuttle in high orbit. Uh ... nineteen ninety-nine by the look of it.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. And that's not all.' Chris input commands. The high-res aerial shot peeled away layer by layer. 'It's been doctored.'

'Look, so some Patrick Moore type has been playing with his Corel Draw program in his lunch break. So what?'

Chris shook his head impatiently. 'You don't get it. Look.' The picture changed again? This time it was overlaid with a series of lines, like a contour map. The lines emanated from two points. One on Mahser Dagi, one on Ararat. I was beginning to see a picture I didn't like.

Chris said, 'These lines represent magnetic-field strength. Something big is buried under both those mountains. Something the Iraqis and the Iranians both think is uranium.'

'Are you telling me it's not?' 'Absolutely. It's not missiles either.' 'I don't get it. What is it then?'

'I don't know. But look. There's a file cross-reference here. The file name is Tranquillity.' Chris pulled up another geological map overlaid with lines of magnetic force: These lines were much more intense. 'I don't recognize the country.'

'That's because it's not on Earth. It's a shot of the Moon. Taken from the same shuttle mission which photographed Raelsen's Ark. A mission commanded by James Edward Allen.'

I bit my lip. 'They knew? NASA knew something was going on here? They sent him here?'

Chris shook his head. 'Maybe. Look here. Two more things. First is a launch schedule for the last three years. See? Regular flights? Normal cargos.'

'Supplies for the COOP Moonbase? The weather base.' 'No. They're listed elsewhere. Now look here. You see? The schedule changes. Suddenly, two years ago, the flights are accelerated. They're being brought forward.

The date of the change is less than two months after the date on these orbital shots. And look here. The next mission, the one scheduled for this month. Look at the cargo.'

I looked. ' "Experimental rabbits". So?'

Chris sighed. 'Three tons? That's a lot of rabbits.' I sighed. 'What's all this got to do with -'

'Bear with me. It's important. Look at the schedule from next month on.'

I shrugged. 'The flights have all been cancelled.'

'Exactly. Now who in their right minds takes three tons of experimental animals to the Moon and then brings back the only personnel there to experiment on them?'

'You tell me.' 'Nobody does.' 'So?'

'So they're not rabbits.' 'Well what are they then?'

Chris sighed. 'I don't know. Maybe it's something to do with the second thing I found.' He brought another file up. 'It's a whole bunch of numbers.

So what?'

'Not just any numbers. Orbital coordinates and references.' I waited. 'For the Moon.'

'Oh good. So we know where to find it next time we go looking.'

Chris ignored my sarcasm. 'Maybe not.' 'And why would that be then?'

'Because there's a wobble in the Moon's orbit. Oh, not a great one, I'll grant you that. But it is significant - and according to these figures it's been there for nearly two hundred million years.'

I shrugged. 'So?'

Chris laughed. 'Jason, you don't just get a wobble in the orbit of something the size of the Moon. There has to be a cause.'

'Such as?'

'Mass reduction.'

'So it's feeding time for the great space bunnies?' 'Or there's a singularity orbiting inside the Moon.' 'Which means?'

'Well, just for starters, how about the destruction of the Moon and the extinction of all life on the hemisphere of the Earth facing X-ray burst

when it happens?'

I was quiet.

Chris shut down the file. 'Look, I know it's hard for you to leave Benny behind. But you must see that this is more important. It's why we have to go to America.'

'What?' I didn't know whether to laugh or scream. 'You said we could -'

'The situation has changed. These photos prove there's a connection between both Mahser Dagi and Ararat, and an unspecified location on the Moon. There may be a problem with the Moon. The last shuttle flight is in three days - and we have to be on it.'

Chris's voice oozed sympathy. I didn't want to know. 'You bastard. You promised me we'd go and get her. You're just like the Doctor, you know that? I thought we were friends. You won't even help me out. If you won't do it for me at least do it for her!'

Chris turned suddenly. His face was livid, his eyes wide. 'I couldn't do anything for her, all right? She was dead before I knew she was in danger!

You know she was, you came to the funeral! I've told you I can't do anything so why can't you just stop asking?'

I had never seen Chris like this. He stood there, every muscle bunched, fists as big as footballs, face a rigid mask of pain? He quivered. It was scary. I backed away.

Chris watched me for a moment then without speaking, bent over his equipment and began to disassemble it.

I watched him for a moment, angry, frightened, puzzled. What was the matter with him? I had never seen him like this, even at Roz's funeral. Had her death affected him more than we'd realized?

It didn't matter. I didn't care. He had his problems. Fine. I had mine too.

And mine were more important?

I backed slowly away from Chris, turned the comer and walked around the hotel. I couldn't decide what to do. I was utterly confused,

shocked and angry? For all I knew the Doctor had planted the information or Chris was lying about it? I knew the big lunk would do anything the Doctor said. He was like a big puppy dog trotting around after his master. All I knew was that Bernice needed my help. I had to show her that I loved her and that all these stupid things she had said about me fancying other women simply weren't true. I loved her for Chrissakes. I had to show her that? I had to.

I reached the area where the Doctor had been playing with the children on my arrival at the hotel earlier that morning.

The place was empty now? Just a splotch of dirt with a scratching of grass baking in the early-afternoon sun. All that remained of the activity here were a few hundred footprints and a dog, who was scratching at a stick lying on the ground.

No. Not a stick. A rifle? The one the Doctor had been playing Jake-the-Peg with.

I picked it up. I hefted it. I wondered if it was loaded.

I walked back around the comer to where Chris had finished packing the equipment back into a kit bag? The Doctor's umbrella handle stuck out, a bright red question mark. It seemed to symbolize what was going on in my mind just then.

'Chris,' I said quietly. He looked up.

I pointed the gun at him.

'Sod the rabbits. We're going to rescue Bernice.'

***

Chapter 7

Things were confused for a while after the helicopter left without me. I have vague recollections of walking at gunpoint across the mountainside. Dilaver was a cold weight in my arms but I couldn't let him go. My whole body ached and I was desperate for water but I felt none of this until later. I remember reaching the camp at Tendurek and being surrounded by Raelsen, Ellie Noble, Ed Levinson and Terry Sehna. They were as surprised to see me alive as I was to see them, I think.

I have dim memories of the others being allowed to feed me and dress my wound again. Of Dilaver being taken from me. Of Tammuz being taken away and tied up against a rock. Of collapsing on to the ground and almost begging for a drink. Of telling them over and over again what had happened to Dot and Reefer, and the members of Jim Allen's expedition.

That they were dead, killed by soldiers, and that we'd be dead as well if we weren't both careful and extremely lucky.

Then I passed out.

The first thing I remember clearly was the taste of coffee. The second thing I remember was Samran pressing a gun into my hand and telling me that I had to interpret our data for him or choose someone to kill.

I stood up, swaying, trying to wake up. 'What?'

He was patient with me. 'Either you pick someone to kill or I will kill everyone here, one by one, until you do as I have asked.'

'If you're going to kill us all anyway why should I -?' 'Because this way some of your friends will live.' 'But I have to choose which one will die.'

'And kill them.' Samran shrugged. His smile showed bright, even teeth. 'Or you could cooperate: interpret the data for me.'

I was fully aware again by now. The shock of being left behind and of finding Dilaver dead was starting to wear off? The coffee I had been given helped. So had the couple of hours' rest. I hefted the gun in my hand. I wondered how much control of the situation it would give me.

I became aware that they were all watching me. Raelsen. Levinson.

Noble.

Sehna Even Tammuz. They were all covered by Iraqi soldiers. I could see the fear in their faces, the confusion. And who could blame them? With the exception of Tammuz they had come here to investigate the past. They were scientists, not soldiers. Civilians. Now I could see from their expressions that they were scared and confused? They knew they might die here? I could see a terrible mixture of anticipation and condemnation in their faces. Anticipation that they might get to live; condemnation of me - for possibly killing one of them to save the others. They hated me for having the choice.

Only I knew it wouldn't work like that: that the choice I had was really no choice at all., Samran wanted information? He was going to get it no matter what the cost in human life. If we all had to die so be it: he would interpret the data himself - just a little more slowly and with a greater margin of error, that was all. We were a convenience. A luxury. One he could easily do without.

Samran watched me watching them and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. I dangled the gun from its trigger guard, held it out towards him. 'I don't play these sort of games, Colonel?'

He looked at the gun, a mild expression creasing his face. He seemed amused, almost contemptuous. 'If I take the gun I will shoot your friends,'

he said simply. 'One by one. Until I get what I want.' He made no attempt to take the gun. 'Is that what you want?'

I frowned, flipped the gun into my palm, aimed it at Raelsen. I saw his expression change. His eyes widened. I shifted the gun around, pointed it in turn at Noble, Sehna Levinson, back to Raelsen, then to Tammuz, tied to his rock. I watched Samran while I did this, hoping for some clue, an edge, something to give me an advantage. There was nothing. I moved the gun back to Raelsen. His expression didn't change but he was breathing harder.

I winked, then abruptly swung the gun to cover Samran. Half a dozen soldiers moved quickly to cover me. Too late. I had the drop on them.

'Back off boys. Or I turn your boss into a colander.' I grinned at Samran.

'The rules of the game have just been changed.'

His expression did not change. The soldiers did not move. For a moment we stared at each other, the gun a cold weight between us.

'You would give your own life? To take mine?' I said nothing. Be inscrutable. They hate that.

He thought it over, signalled to his men. The soldiers moved fast. Each covered one member of the expedition. That left half a dozen left over to cover me. Still Samran did not smile. 'The rules have just changed back again.' He shrugged, a casual movement of narrow shoulders. 'But the choice is still yours. Kill me and you all die.' He paused, then added, 'Of course you could still cooperate? In which case you will all live.'

I thought it over. There didn't seem to be any way to win? I let the gun dangle by its trigger guard from my finger.

This time he took it. 'Good. Your friends may live. We will begin interpreting the data immediately.' He smiled. 'I am glad you chose to end the game this way.'

'You better hope there's never a rematch,' I muttered angrily.

He ejected the gun's ammo clip. Gave it to me. There were no bullets in it.

He laughed as he took out a fresh clip. 'Brave words, Mrs Summerfield.

Maybe one day you will get your wish. For now - his eyes narrowed and his voice snapped out like a whip as he slapped the clip into place '-you will do as you are told.'

Interpreting the data was easy. Collating it was hard. Everyone had their own system, and all of them were angry with me for agreeing - as they saw it - to sell them out to Samran. I didn't blame them. They hadn't seen what I'd seen. Hadn't seen Dot and Reefer killed. I doubt if any of them had experienced anything more traumatic in their lives than university politics.

Well, maybe Raelsen had. He was an engineer. And there was that aborted conversation we'd had - nearly had - back in Dogubayazit. The one in which he'd hinted at some traumatic reason for his interest in the Tendurek Formation. Twelve days ago. That was all it had been. Grief, how things change.

Raelsen surrendered his notes easily. The others followed suit. All except Ed Levinson.

He stood an arm's length from me, clutching his laptop. His face was calm.

Too calm. 'You can't have it.'

I sighed. 'Look around you. You see any of these soldiers holding water pistols? They'll shoot you if you don't cooperate.'

Ed sat down, cross-legged., He said calmly, 'I claim diplomatic immunity. I am not subject to this conflict. I will not surrender my information.'

By now the soldiers were getting interested. One sauntered over, gun at the ready.

'Ed, please.'

Ellie Noble said, 'Ed, don't be silly. It's a bunch of numbers. It's not worth your life.'

Levinson licked his lips. 'You don't understand. If we all refused to cooperate there's nothing they could do.' He looked at me and his eyes were bright with accusation. 'It's your fault. You're working with them.'

Noble moved closer, put her hand on Levinson's arm. 'Benny's just doing what she thinks will save our lives. It will. If you cooperate.'

Levinson shook off Noble's hand. 'No! You're both working with them. Give up our data? Then what? They get all the credit, we get nothing!'

The penny dropped. I said, 'Ed, listen to me very carefully. They don't want to publish. They think there are uranium deposits here. They don't want the Ark data. They're not going to steal any academic glory from you. They don't want to publish? They want to -'

Levinson jumped to his feet, still clutching the laptop to his chest. 'Sure, I see it! They want to dig up Tendurek, dig up the Ark! And for what? A bunch of uranium to make bombs out of? Don't you get it? The Ark is a symbol of life - we can't let them make it into one of death!'

By this time Samran himself had heard the argument. He came out of

his tent and quickly crossed the hundred or so yards that separated us? 'What is going on here?' He looked at me. 'I told you to get the data. Is this man refusing to cooperate?' He drew his pistol.

I said, 'No, Colonel. Everything's fine. Ed's just expressing some ...

concern, that's all.'

Levinson turned to face Samran, 'You think we're fools! You think we'll just give up our data to you like that?' He stepped closer to Samran and snapped his fingers in the colonel's face.

Half a dozen soldiers had their guns levelled before the click of Levinson's fingers echoed away. Samran's own gun, aimed at the radar specialist's face, seemed almost redundant.

Ellie Noble was holding Levinson's arm and whispering, 'Ed, no, please, don't be stupid,' over and over again? Levinson ignored her. 'Well we won't!

We have immunity. The American Embassy in Ankara will hear of this. In fact I'll bloody well phone them now, and then we'll see what you have to say to that!'

He reached into his pocket.

Samran jammed his gun barrel against Levinson's forehead. 'Do not move.'

His expression didn't change. Levinson froze, one hand in his pocket, the other clutching his laptop. Noble had shut up. Levinson shut up too.

For a moment, nobody moved.

I said, quietly, 'Colonel. We need him.'

Without turning Samran said, 'We need his data.' He pressed forward on the gun, keeping the pressure on until Levinson was forced to sit down.

'The computer.'

Levinson didn't move. Noble took it from him and held it out to Samran.

'Give it to her.' He nodded towards me. I took the laptop. 'Thanks.'

Noble just looked disgusted. It matched the look Levinson had for her.

Samran pulled the gun back from Levinson's face. 'Now take your hand out of your pocket.'

Levinson did as he was told.

'A SAT phone. Please put it on the ground.' Levinson did it. _ 'Now stand up.'

He did as he was told. I couldn't look away. I was sure Samran was going to shoot Levinson in cold blood, as an example to the rest of us.

Samran placed his gun back against Levinson's head. Noble seemed about to speak. Samran just looked at her. 'Move away.'

She obeyed.

Samran returned his attention to Levinson. His finger tightened on the trigger.

'Now stamp on it.'

Levinson stared at Samran for a moment, then ground his heel into the phone.

'Again?'

Levinson obeyed. From the look on his face you'd have thought it was Samran himself he was crushing.

'Good.' Samran holstered his pistol. 'You see, Mister Levinson, how easy it is to do as you are told?' He glanced around at the others, watching silently, then issued instructions to the soldiers. 'I have told my men to collect all other satellite telephones and minifaxes.' He turned to me. 'You have one hour to collate your data and bring the results to me.' He turned and marched back to his tent.

It didn't take me long to put it together. The question was: would Samran believe me?

A few minutes before the hour was up, I got one of the soldiers to take me to Samran's tent. He received me about as graciously as an invading soldier could. At least he offered me tea. That was as far as the pleasantries went, however?

I sat cross-legged in the tent and sipped tea.

Samran waited. I tried to work out how to begin. The evidence wasn't as much of a surprise to me as it was going" to be to him. '

'You're a soldier,' I began. He nodded. 'Career military?' 'Is there any other kind?'

I gauged the impatience in his voice and said, 'I was a soldier too. Once.'

He studied me over the top of his mug. 'You went AWOL.'

I admitted to surprise? 'How did you know?'

His lips thinned. 'You think to gain my trust, show a similarity between us.

The similarity is superficial. I have experience with those who consider the truth a difficult thing for others to hear. Sometimes they think this because they themselves find it difficult to hear.'

'Do you think I'm going to lie to you?'

'I have no doubt you serve your own ends by serving mine. But you are not a stupid person, I think.'

I took a breath. 'What I'm going to say is not going to be easy to hear.'

He waited.

I opened the laptop and booted it up.

He said, ' "The attacks were just part of President Clinton's election campaign." '

I looked up. If his voice was bitter, his expression was tragic. 'You're quoting Masaud Barzani - 1996. The Intervention.'

He nodded. 'Seven years ago my family were living in Southern Iraq. It was the year twenty-seven cruise missiles were launched from American bombers and warships in the Gulf. Five people were killed, nineteen injured. My wife and son were among the dead.' His voice sank to a whisper. 'Believe me, I am very familiar with things that are, "not easy to hear".'

I wasn't about to argue. I shoved a disk into the laptop and hit LOAD. Then I showed him the results.

He spotted it straight away. 'There is no evidence of gamma-ray activity.'

'Not now there isn't. But there was.' 'Explain.'

'The only gamma activity was a by-product of a molecular process which is ongoing in certain formations.' I waited. He said nothing. I went on, 'Certain stones known as drogue stones, the Tendurek Formation itself, all are composed of a similar material. It responds to analysis by disguising itself at a molecular level.'

'There is no such material.' 'Not on Earth, no.'

'You are saying this material is of alien origin?'

I nodded. 'It's been here a long time. Twenty million years, give or take.

And it's very discreet. It must have realized it was being scanned from orbit by your satellites. It just wasn't smart enough to realize it had disguised itself as something even more likely to attract your attention.'

'And the purpose of this alien material?'

I shrugged. 'Well, I've been thinking about that. Have you heard of sibling particles? Pairs of particles linked at a molecular level, probably by a quantum wormhole; linked but not necessarily in close physical juxtaposition? Particles with a relationship even though they might be anything up to light years apart?' I waited for a response. He wasn't getting it. 'You ever see Star Trek?'

He nodded.

I said, '"Beam me up, Scotty."' I waited. 'Get it now? We're talking matter transfer without direct physical connection.'

'Indeed?' Samran's voice was quiet, curious. 'Matter transfer to where?'

I'd thought about that one too? 'Jim Allen carried a piece of moonrock with him. The rock had the same molecular signature as the drogue stones.

Draw your own conclusion.'

Samran put down his mug. I could see him thinking about what I had said.

After a moment he gestured to a soldier, spoke a few words in Arabic.

The soldier left the tent, reappeared a few minutes later with Ed Levinson. I frowned. What did S an want with Levinson? Ed was a radar specialist. If wanted confirmation I was telling the truth he really needed Sehna or Noble. Allen would have been the obvious candidate, being a physicist. Or Dot. I tried not to dwell on that thought.

Samran beckoned Levinson into the tent. 'Mister Levinson. I have asked you here to help me learn the truth.'

He drew his pistol and shot Levinson in the chest. Levinson fell over, thudded into the ground. Blood leaked slowly through his jacket? He blinked, gave a puzzled sigh and died.

I stood up screaming. 'Jesus Christ, what the hell do you think you're doing you stupid idiot? He couldn't hurt you - he was just a bloody radar specialist! A civilian! He had a kid! He had a family! He . . .'

Samran waited patiently for me to shut up. Eventually I did. 'And now, Mrs Summerfield, we will stop playing games. And this time you will tell me the truth?'

Samran holstered the pistol. It wasn't like he needed to aim it at me to make his point or anything. I stood there stupidly and opened my hands.

What could I say? I told him the truth and he killed Ed Levinson.

While we stood there silently observing one another, the soldier dragged Levinson's body away. I wondered for a moment why the shot hadn't brought everyone pushing into the tent - then remembered all the other soldiers with guns. The tent flaps closed behind Levinson's boots. Samran said, 'Well?'

'If you're going to kill me you might as well do it. Ditto everyone else. I told you I don't play games.' I hit Samran with my most bitter stare. 'You screwed up, buster. I told you the truth and you shot my friend. What incentive do I have for cooperating now?' 'Preserving your own life.'

'Oh do me a favour. You know you're not going to let us go anyway. You might as well take the information you have back to your boffins and leave us here to rot. There's nothing here for you, Colonel, most certainly not the uranium or missile base you think is here.'

Samran studied my laptop. The casual way he ignored me told me that trying to run would be futile. He input a few commands. I felt my unease increase as his fingers sped across the keys. He knew what he was looking for. It didn't take him long to find it.

'Then perhaps you could explain why the results of an ultrasound scan reveal the presence of a chamber some five metres wide beneath the Tendurek Formation?'

I shrugged. 'This mountain is riddled with little caves and volcanic pockets.'

'I am sure. I am also sure that none of them are perfect cubes.'

I said nothing.

Samran closed the laptop. 'You withheld information from me. You lied to me. Give me one good reason why I. should not have you killed right now?'

I pulled out my trowel. 'I can dig.'

The soldiers placed Levinson in a rolled-up tent for later burial. Samran allowed us no time to grieve. He ordered us to dig.

We worked inside the Formation. No one chose to argue about desecrating a historical site. Two hours and three metres later we hit something too solid to dig through. Samran thought it must be metal. It was stone. At first we thought it was a shelf of granite protruding into the soil. By exposing a wide swathe we were able to see that it was perfectly flat. We had found the top surface of the cube.

Samran ordered soldiers with Geiger counters and X-ray detectors to scan the area. Nothing. But I knew what this material was: it was the same stuff the drogue stones were made of.

We excavated around the cube to try to find a way in. Another two hours'

work produced nothing except a faint indentation in the shape of a number of grooves in'. the south-west corner. Apart from this there was no sign of a door or hatch or even of any cable conduits or ports. I hadn't expected any.

The drogue stones had none. Why should this structure be any different?

Frustrated, Samran began to pace. The others seemed nervous at this. I could understand why. Samran had shown himself to be as cold-blooded a killer as Tammuz. And that was when he had been calm. Who knew what he would do now he was angry?

Samran seemed on the point of yelling abuse when a soldier came up to him. They talked in quiet voices for a moment. Samran's face became even more angry. He dismissed the soldier with a curt gesture and began to issue orders. Two soldiers ran over to the block on which we stood and set down haversacks from which they produced small metal boxes. The boxes looked terrifyingly familiar. Blasting charges. They were going to blow an entrance in the cube.

I shook my head. 'You'll destroy whatever's in there if you use explosives.'

Samran frowned. 'My radio operator has reported the presence of enemy troops. They will be here in less than twenty minutes.

We cannot open the structure. We cannot move it. We cannot leave it for them. There is only one remaining option?'

I went cold. 'You're going to destroy it?'

'And you with it, I'm afraid. It is the last game, Mrs Summerfield - and participation is compulsory.'

He signalled to the soldiers who held us at gunpoint while another tied us hand and foot, and left us lying side by side on the top of the block we had been working on.

A moment later Tammuz was brought to the excavation site and pushed down the slope to fall among us.

Samran checked the four charges himself and then scrambled up the slope. He looked back as he reached the top. 'I am tempted to take one or more of you as hostages. But that would prove too complicated. The charges will be armed and detonated by remote control when we are clear?

With any luck the explosion will kill some of the enemy as well.'

He walked off the mound of dirt and out of sight.

I wondered how long we had to live.

'Can anyone get out of their ropes?' That was Raelsen. 'What the hell do you think?' Sehna. Close 'to panic. Then again, so was everyone.

I twisted my arms. 'No. They're too tight? You?' 'No?

A moment passed in silence.

'How long will it take them to get clear?' Noble? Trying to stay calm.

'How the hell should I know?' Sehna. Panicking now. 'I only asked!'

'Well don't, all right! We're gonna die. Why don't you just - A long silence.

'Oh hell, Ellie. I'm sorry.'

'Yeah, well. Won't make a difference soon, anyway.'

A silence. A longer silence than I would have thought possible under the circumstances.

Raelsen said, 'Perhaps they're waiting for the others to get here. So they can kill them as well when the charges detonate.'

Sehna said in a trembly voice, 'Does that give us a chance?'

There was another long silence. Nobody, it seemed, had an answer for him.

Further conversation was stalled by the sound of rope parting. I twisted round on the rock. Tammuz was sitting up. His hands were free and he was working at the ropes securing his ankles. A few feet away from him was one of the charges. The little light on the top which would signify an arming signal was dark. Still time then.

By now we were all staring at Tammuz. He freed his ankles and stood up.

'Tammuz, listen to me. Get to the charges. Throw them out of the pit. We have to preserve this structure.'

Without acknowledging my words he moved to the nearest charge and studied it. He tried to move it. The casing was secured by a chain to a ring bolt sunk into the rock.

I swore.

Tammuz moved to the edge of the block and began to climb out of the pit.

'Wait!' Sehna's voice was thin and high. 'You can't just leave us.'

Tammuz ignored him.

I tried a long shot. 'I know how to open the block.' Tammuz looked back at me. I saw the look in his eyes. I had him.

I said, 'You must have a few minutes yet until the others get close enough for Samran to detonate the charges.' Tammuz looked away, then back. He moved quickly back down the pit to me. 'Tell me how.'

'Untie me.' 'Tell me first.' 'Don't mess about, Tammuz. We don't have very much = A bleep from the first charge. The light glowed red. Armed.

At the same time I heard the sound of boots crunching on rocks.

Tammuz started away from me.

'Tammuz, forget it, you haven't got time to get away. These charges are big.'

Now I could hear voices. The second charge bleeped.

A yell. A gun fired. Then another. A ricochet zipped over my head. In seconds automatic fire echoed across the dig. They'd seen each other.

They were firing at each other. How much time would that buy us?

'Listen,' I whispered urgently. 'The grooves. South-west corner. Run your finger along them? Do it now and you might save us all!'

The third charge bleeped. Tammuz ran to do as I told him.

More gunfire. And screams. The sound of falling bodies. 'Hurry up. Each groove in order. Once in each direction. Do it now! Hurry!'

The fourth charge bleeped. Four red lights penning us in. Four charges armed and ready to detonate.

The gunfire stopped. Silence. Eerie, complete silence. Tammuz ran his finger along the grooves.

The charges blew.

Flame lashed at me, then was instantly snuffed into darkness. Someone screamed. Gravity rocked, lifted me into the air, crushed me flat, then settled at less than half what I was used to.

In the space of a breath all sound stopped. No screams. No explosions.

And no air.

My skin burned. My ears felt like someone had jammed knitting needles into them. Zero pressure. My brain whirled. No sound. No pressure. One-sixth g.

I was on the Moon.

No. I was inside the Moon; anywhere on the surface and my eyes would have been vitreous-humour-flavoured lollipops by now.

The transmat had worked. We had escaped the charges. But somehow I didn't feel like patting myself on the back. Right now we were very definitely out of the frying pan and into the fire.

I held my breath and tried to ignore the terrible pain in my ears. My instinct was to cry out for help. I suppressed it with an effort. It was an easy way to rupture every blood vessel in my lungs. Besides, there was no point in panicking: I was bound hand and foot. I couldn't move.

I lay as still as I could and tried to resist the impulse to breathe air that I knew wasn't there. If we were lucky someone would find us, or automatic systems would provide an atmosphere to this chamber. If not we would die.

It was that simple. Live or die. All I could do now was wait. I passed out while I was waiting?

I lay still and quiet. I could hear dull sounds. Sounds like voices and machinery. But a long way off. As if there was a thick wall between them and me? A thick, dark wall. I swallowed. My throat hurt. Actually I hurt everywhere. My hands and face felt like they'd had a day under a binary giant with no sunblock. My ears hurt very badly.

I opened my eyes. I did it without thinking, while distracted by the pain from the rest of my body. I saw a brilliant light and blinked. After a few seconds my eyes adjusted. I lifted a hand to wipe tears from my cheeks. That was when it hit me: I wasn't tied up any more. I was breathing. I could hear and I could see.

I opened my eyes again. This time the light was bearable. I looked up and saw a woman in her fifties bending over me. She wasn't quite smiling.

'Liz Shaw,' I said in a cracked whisper. 'How on Earth are you?'

She seemed surprised. 'How did you know my name?'

I remembered a dying world. overrun by dinosaurs, humanity all but extinct, Silurians in control, and managed a weak smile.

'Read it on your name badge.' I held out my hand. 'Bernice Summerfield.

Benny.'

'Well, Benny, this may be a little hard for you to believe - it's certainly more than a little hard for me to believe - but you're =

'- on the Moon.'

Liz looked bemused. 'Good guess.'

'Low gravity. No air.' I managed a grin. 'Only one person I ever met had dress sense that ran to inflatable rubber and even he didn't walk around with a life-support unit strapped to his back. So it's got to be the Moon.'

'Well, you're right. And we're obviously less of a puzzle to you than you are to us. You feel up to a drink and a chat?' 'Sure. Lucozade is fine. I'll have a pint.' I let Liz help me sit up and looked around. 'A cave. How unexpected.'

Liz handed me a tube of glucose and shook her head in bemusement.

'What?'

'Nothing. It's just that your sense of humour is . . .' A shrug? 'Oh I don't know. Somehow familiar that's all.' 'Compliment accepted.' I stood up. The cave was lit by worklights. Cables snaked everywhere. Plastic boxes with snap fastenings lined the walls. The boxes were quite large. Some of them were open. I had a sudden insight as to how I had been rescued from the airless chamber where the transport system had deposited us. Research equipment was stacked in neat piles. Equipment and boxes were marked with NASA logos. Some had another sign as well. UNIT. I nodded at the nearest box. 'Lethbridge-

Stewart's lot come out of the woodwork at last have they?'

Liz's eyes narrowed. 'What do you know about UNIT?' Something about Liz's tone made me hesitate. 'Oh ... not much.'

Liz went quiet for a moment. Then she said, 'Listen to me. This place is top secret?' She held up her hands. 'Yes, sure, I know, cliché number one, but it's true. Right now you're a

serious breach of security. If I was you I'd be a bit more circumspect about the names I dropped.'

'Hint taken. Going to take me to your leader?' Liz grinned suddenly. 'I am the leader.'

'Good. A sensible face running things for once.'

Liz stopped smiling. 'But I'm not the political officer.' 'The political officer?'

Liz shook her head. 'Never mind.'

I shrugged, abandoned the communist joke on the tip of my tongue, instead tried taking a few steps. I managed not to fall flat on my face, so I tried a few more. They were fine too. 'Seems I'm on a roll today. All I need now are my friends back and some painkillers for my ears.'

Liz frowned. 'Only two of you made it through the decompression. I'm sorry.'

'Oh damn. How did they -?'

'Well one was killed by an explosion of some kind. Another was concussed and suffocated while unconscious.' There was a woman - it looks like she died of a heart attack. I don't know what else I can tell you.'

'You can tell me who else survived.'

The distant ring of gunshots gave me the answer to my question before Liz could speak.

I followed Liz out of the storeroom I had recovered in and together we ran along a narrow passage. We ran in long strides because of the low gravity.

Liz was much better at it than I was.

'Where are we going?'

'The shots came from the Museum?' 'You have a museum here?'

A funny sideways look from Liz. 'We don't. They did.' 'They?'

'Yes, they.'

The rocky passage ended abruptly, opening out into a chamber some five hundred metres high. The walls were smooth and glistened as if hollowed out by acid - although there was none of the random dissolution which you might associate with acid etching. Obviously the chamber had not been produced with any current Earth technology. The chamber was a' sphere.

Suspended in the centre, by no visible means, was ... something. A machine? It, too, was clearly not of Earth origin. Though the chamber was brightly fit by more than a hundred worklights the machine seemed to be wreathed in shadows. Like smoke, the shadows drifted slowly around the machine, areas of deeper black in a bubble of jet, concealing its form.

Liz was off again, moving quickly down a curved ramp to the base of the chamber. Here the curvature of the concave floor was shallow enough to walk on. My first steps were tentative; the surface looked slippery, like black ice with billions of points of light buried in it. Then I realized there was more than enough traction here. And I also noticed that, although the surface looked highly reflective, I could make out no mirror image of myself

- or indeed of anything else I could see. No worklights, no part of the machine hovering unsupported twenty or so metres above my head, nothing. No material I had ever seen absorbed light as efficiently as the surface on which I ran. I found the thought both interesting and scary. I followed Liz to an area isolated by movable screens, the kind you might find in a hospital ward or a laboratory, only very much bigger. They were green translucent plastic, obviously terrestrial, and stuck out like a mouse in a bowl of soup in the glistening alien darkness? Ranged along the base of the other side of the screens nearest us were a number of prone bodies.

One, a man, was moaning softly. The others were still. Beyond them the picture was less clear. There were lights and dark shapes. Some of the forms were person-shaped. One of them was moving. It strutted up and down, shaking its head. It was talking. I couldn't understand the words because the screens muffled them and the only ones to reach

me were too badly distorted by echoes to make out, but I recognized the voice: Tammuz. As I watched a shot rang out and another silhouette fell over. Tammuz kicked the body aside. It rolled loosely in the low gravity, stopping only when it bumped against the screens.

Liz ran for the screens. I bounded after her, grabbed her shoulder, managed to hold her back.

'Wait,' I whispered. 'Go in there and he'll shoot you just like all the rest.'

Liz looked at me. Her face was a mixture of fear and rage. 'Who the hell are you? What are you doing here? How did you work the matter transmitter, something we've been trying for months to get operational?'

Her voice was close to panic - no, not just panic: rage. A dangerous combination at any time, let alone now. 'You're terrorists, aren't you? Here to mess up the project. You don't get it do you? If we're right about this machinery any sort of interference, that isn't strictly controlled could bring about a catastrophe of -

'Shut up a minute, will you?' I interrupted. 'I know what you're thinking. I came here with a Bunch of people - some were injured, you've seen evidence of explosives, now there's a man shooting your friends. I know what this looks like. But it isn't that. We're not trying to take over. The man in there is an Iranian soldier. He thinks he's found uranium or a stockpile of nuclear missiles near Ararat in Turkey but he doesn't understand that -

look, it's just really complicated and we have to stop him. Now.'

I could tell Liz was still angry and shocked - but somehow she managed to stay calm. 'Well, you're right about that. There's machinery here that would make God's flood look like a kid splashing through a muddy puddle.'

Something in Liz's voice made me shiver. Machinery? Flood? Matter transmitters? Suddenly it all clicked into place. 'That's it. Oh God, that's it.

He wants the power. He thinks he can control it. He's wrong. He doesn't even understand it.' I hesitated. 'He's going to -'

'What?' Liz's question was urgent but I ignored it, instead crept towards the screens. I stepped over a body to reach the plastic

sheeting of one screen and parted it a finger's width so

I could peer through. And so I could listen.

Tammuz was standing beside a small group of technicians, all of whom were kneeling down, hands on their heads. I was terrified I was going to be right about what Tammuz was planning. I was.

'It is very clear to me that Americans have once again taken sides in a conflict which has nothing to do with them. Iranian satellites detect uranium beneath Ararat. When I investigate, what do I find? A military base with advanced technology run by Americans.'

Someone said in a quiet voice, 'Look, we're Americans, sure, but we're not running this place. We're investigating it. And we're nowhere near goddamn Turkey and we couldn't give a monkey's about your damn war -

A shot cracked out. The sound of a falling body. I winced. Beside me Liz tensed. I grabbed her and forced her to sit down. So far Tammuz didn't know we were here. He couldn't. That meant we had an advantage. Well, about as much of an advantage as you could expect under the circumstances. .

Tammuz said, 'Don't treat me like a fool. I am not a fool. This base is obviously military in nature. The technology alone makes this clear.' I parted the plastic curtains a little further. Now I could make out banks of machinery of alien design. Located centrally was a shape that was somehow familiar: a hexagonal master control system. A cylinder placed on top of the console was filled with a grey gas. I recognized a holographic presentation system. Tammuz slapped his hand against the console. Laser light blinked within the cylindrical tank. I saw maps. Maps of continents on Earth. Something was odd about them. I was still trying to puzzle out why the console looked so familiar when Tammuz said, 'This is obviously a targeting system. You will tell me how to operate it.' He pointed his gun at one of the few remaining technicians. Liz gasped softly. It was clear Tammuz was selecting someone else to kill.

The technician began to babble. 'Look, I've got a wife. Kids. Please listen to me. We're telling you the truth.' Tammuz pressed the gun against the man's forehead. I kept my hand on Liz's shoulder to stop her moving. I felt her body tense. Something was going on here. The technician said, 'All right, man, OK, don't shoot me! I'll tell you. I'll tell you it all - just don't shoot me, OK? OK?'

Liz swore softly. I got it. She wasn't scared for the man's life. She was scared he would say something he shouldn't. She was terrified he would say something he shouldn't.

The technician said, 'Look. You don't understand. You haven't been here.

We think these systems are in some kind of accidental lock. If we free the lock and activate the systems we might not be able to shut them down again. The program is designed to run until complete. Do you understand?

If we start them up they won't stop. They can't stop.'

Tammuz thought it over and pulled his gun back from the technician's head. I could see a circular bruise forming there. His voice was steady, perfectly calm. 'I'm waiting.'

The technician clambered to his feet. 'Look. You can't do this. You're opening Pandora's Box, for Chrissakes. Even we don't know what's inside!'

Tammuz placed the gun back against the technician's head and held it there until the man broke down and agreed to help him?

Liz tensed once again beneath my restraining hand. I heard her exhale an angry breath. And suddenly one part of it made sense: if I was right this place was six billion years old - yet the holographic systems were displaying modern maps with current geological configurations. The systems were six billion years old but the maps could have been made this morning.

I pulled Liz to her feet and dragged her away. She protested. I shook her hard? 'You know how to use this machinery. You know what it's for. Tell me! It's important.'

Something poked me hard in the ribs. I looked down. 'Ah. Cliché number two: the good guys have guns.'

Liz said, deadpan, 'You're right. It is important.'

I quipped, 'Cliché number three: the good guys are really the bad guys.'

I didn't see Liz pull the trigger, because I'd turned to run. But I felt the blast as she shot me.

I fell over,. paralysed. I was aware of my body jerking convulsively and realized the gun was an electrostunner, a development of the kind used by women against assailants in the twentieth century.

Eventually I stopped jerking. But I couldn't move. Liz bent over me, peered into my eyes, took my pulse. Checking I wasn't dead. What a kind heart.

She stood up. I had a first-class view of her boots.

I heard her take something from her pocket. It must have been a personal recorder because she began to speak into it. 'Commsystem activate.

Authority Shaw Zero-Zero-One-Alpha. Transmission to Tranquillity Base.

Message as follows: security breached Museum activated. Shutdown impossible. Recommend standby team move into target zone five; priority: investigation, possible sterilization. Recommend primary zone evac ASAP

Situation critical. Casualties at sixty per cent. Be aware: targets are armed and dangerous. Condition black, repeat condition black. Agent Yellow is on the move. I'll do what I can with the serum from this end but I think it's unstoppable now. Tell Imorkal I love him. End transmission authority Shaw Zero-Zero-One-Alpha.'

Something in Liz's voice made me shiver. That was the second time that had happened. Was I wrong about her? What was wrong or right, anyway, in a situation like this?

Liz bent to check me once more. She said, 'I think it's too late to stop what your psychotic friend in there has started but I'm going to try anyway. We're not the bad guys, Benny-whoever-you-are. Just remember after this is all over that I could have killed you.' She walked away.

I lay there for a while. Then I heard voices. At first I thought the voices were in my head, the after-effects of the taser shock, my mind playing tricks on me. No? I recognized these

voices all too easily. Liz. Liz and Tammuz. Liz's voice was slightly distorted, as though she were speaking on a tannoy - or a communications device.

She said, 'This is Operations Chief Elizabeth Shaw addressing the terrorist in the Museum. Shut down the transmission systems now. If you do not, you will endanger the lives of millions of people.'

Tammuz's response was typical. 'What you say is irrelevant. The systems are active. Targeting has commenced.'

'You don't get it, do you? Whatever you're trying to do, it won't work. I am standing in the transmission room. I am holding the only quantity of an experimental antivirus yet to be developed. If you launch now you will destroy me and the virus. There will be no possibility of any countermeasures against Agent Yellow.'

'Then a lesson will have been learnt. A lesson I wish very much to teach.'

'Listen to me. You're irrational> If you go ahead, millions will die.'

'Miss Shaw, you are repeating yourself. I will entertain no further discussion.'

The voices stopped then. In fact it was the last time I ever heard Liz speak.

Moments later, as I lay, still paralysed on the floor, shooting stars began to edge my vision. I thought I was beginning to lose consciousness but then realized the lights were coming from the machine hanging above me.

Tammuz had made good on his threat. He had activated the transmission sequence. I hoped Liz had got out of the chamber in time. My own recollections of being there were the furthest thing from pleasant I had encountered in a long while.

A ticking noise came from the machine like a Geiger counter, or a clock ticking away the last moments of someone's life. The shadows englobing the machine swirled faster and faster, oil on black water. The ticking increased to a machine-gun rattle, a painful scream of noise, then dropped abruptly to a floor-shaking subsonic rumble which made my teeth rattle and my ears itch and my flesh feel like it was being shaken off my bones. After a few moments the sound stabilized into a rhythmic pulse; a familiar sound which brought another memory clicking into place.

Apart from its size and the fact that it had obviously been etched from a block of metal by corrosive acid, the central operating system

Tammuz must now be using was identical in shape to the navigation console in the Doctor's TARDIS.

As I thought this the machine went dark and silent. Transmission was complete. But transmission of what and to where? Only one person knew.

But though I lay there for hours, paralysed by the taser shock, Liz Shaw never came back.

***

Chapter 8

Four hours after I waved the Russian semi-automatic at Chris we were back on Mahser Dagi. The flight had not been uneventful? After ten minutes in the air we were overflown by military jets. I had no idea what side they were on but there sure were a lot of them? About half a dozen.

That was a hell of a force to fly over an empty mountain. Except it wasn't empty, was it? Bernice was there - and heaven alone knew who or what else with her. Ten minutes later we flew over the foothills - and over a procession of military vehicles. They seemed to be heading in the same direction, towards Tendurek, but compared with our speed they were moving at a crawl. We left them behind easily.

With the setting sun at our backs we overflew the Tendurek Formation high and fast, and that was when I saw the bodies. There were at least a dozen of them. Obviously soldiers. Lying in various positions indicating they were dead. Who had killed them? Had Bernice gone ape? Had other Iranian soldiers caught up with Samran's Iraqi forces?

I told Chris to go back? We overflew the area again and that was when I noticed the excavation - and the signs of an explosion. If Tendurek really was the Ark somebody had first dug a big hole right in the middle of it and then blown it up? So much for religious sanctity. At least it explained the bodies.

I pointed all this out to Chris and asked him if he thought it was safe to land. The big guy simply shrugged and eased the stick forward, setting the chopper down in a cloud of grit and dust a few hundred yards from the site of the explosion. Leaving the engine idling we stepped out of the chopper and on to the ground. It was cold. And dim, the setting sun casting a muted orange glow across the barren rocks. The light flickered intermittently from the tips of the newly repaired rotors. The rest of the chopper was in the shadow of the mountain.

The nearest soldiers lay still and cold. Their clothes rippled in the down-draught from the rotors. Chris stopped by one, checked for a pulse. The man was dead. A trickle of blood ran from one ear along the corner of his jaw. The blood was coated with dust - but it was long since dried.

According to Chris the man bad been dead for several hours. Chris

checked another soldier. 'Iraqis and Iranians.'

'They killed each other?' 'Seems likely.'

'Now will you believe me when I say it was worth coming back for her?'

Chris straightened up, loomed over me as if he were part of the mountain.

'Jason, I don't want to discuss it. You knew the situation. You held me at gunpoint. I thought we were friends.' I saw with a shock that he was holding the soldier's sidearm. I expected him to point it at me and to order us to get the hell out of there. He simply put the gun in his pocket. 'Well now we're here. So let's just get on with it, shall we? And hope the consequences of our actions aren't too serious.'

I turned angrily away and walked towards the Tendurek Formation, some hundred yards distant. The sun was setting over the mountaintop now, and shadows were deepening. I squinted into the sun, wishing I had a pair of sunglasses with me. Stupidly, I'd left them at the hotel in Dogubayazit. I could make out nothing at the site beyond a heap of earth and rubble -

obviously debris from an explosion.

I moved towards the site, checking each of the bodies to make sure none of them was Bernice, and clambered up on to the pile of rubble. I looked over the edge. It took me a moment to penetrate the gloom. I don't know whether I felt relieved or disappointed to see there was nothing there. At least nothing beyond a large block of what looked like concrete.

Chris clambered up beside me. 'Look at this.' He showed me a laptop computer. It was bashed and the casing was scarred by grit - but the screen still lit up when he switched it on. 'Now look at this.' He booted the computer. Nothing happened. 'Dead as a doornail.'

'Someone wiped it?'

'Including the operating system? There's nothing in here at all. No files, no system manager, nothing.'

'So it's broken.' I shrugged. I had more important things to worry about?

'Not just broken. Wiped. As in by an EMP.'

I laughed. It came out rather more nervously than I intended? 'You see signs of a nuclear blast here?'

'Other things can cause an EMP.' 'Such as?'

Chris shrugged. 'Badly aligned matter transmitter would do the trick.'

'Could that have caused this explosion?'

'Maybe. But probably not.' He peered into the gloomy crater. 'You see anything here?'

'A big concrete block.' 'Perhaps it's a bunker.' 'Beneath a two-thousand-year-old artefact? I doubt it.' 'Do you suppose Bernice could be inside?'

I held back my fear that the woman I loved was as dead as the soldiers lying on the ground all around us. 'For God's sake let's find out.' We scrambled down for a closer look.

Chris noticed the blood first. There was a lot of it. Someone had been killed here. 'This looks like blast damage. From shaped charges.'

'So where's the body?'

He nodded. 'Good point. More evidence for a matter transmitter?'

I didn't answer. I was busy searching the rubble for some sign that the person who had been killed was - or wasn't - Bernice. I searched for a long time but I found nothing.

Giving up the search, I climbed on to the block. Chris had been studying the blast debris. 'You know, from the spread of the rubble here I'd say there was more than one charge - probably as many as four - and they were all placed on top of the block.'

'So?'

'Well - look at the destruction around us. You can bet they were military charges. Very intense. But the block itself is undamaged.'

I had to admit he was right. But it left neither of us any closer to an answer to the puzzle. And to be honest I didn't really care. I just wanted to find Bernice and get the hell out of there. The longer I was here the more tense and nervous I was getting.

'Look. Can we just try and find a way inside this thing? If Bernice isn't here we need to know, right?'

Chris didn't argue. Together we examined the block. We were hasty but Chris at least was thorough. By the time night had fallen we realized there was no way into the block. And the only markings we could see. on it were a set of grooves located in the upper surface.

Chris said, 'If you want to go on with this search I suggest we go back to the chopper and get flashlights.'

Reluctantly I agreed. It hurt me to leave the site without some definite knowledge of what had happened to Bernice. But what could I do?

We clambered out of the crater and I began to walk back to the chopper?

Chris didn't move.

'Chris?'

'The chopper.' 'What?'

'The engine's stopped.'

I went cold. 'Do you think someone's there?'

'I don't know. Get down and keep quiet. I'll check it out.'

Despite being told to stay still and quiet I followed Chris back to the chopper. It was hard to keep him in sight. It was also hard to walk without knocking against stones. The sound of my feet crunching in the dirt seemed deafening in the cold night, though I'm sure the noise travelled no more than a few feet at most.

I levelled the rifle I had held since we had set out from Dogubayazit. In the gloom I could see Chris had drawn the dead soldier's gun.

Beyond him the chopper was a bulky shadow squatting on its rocky shelf. It was still and silent. There was no movement. No light from the cockpit.

Cautiously Chris approached. Even more cautiously I followed.

Ten feet from the chopper something scuffed the rocks. The sound came from my right. I whirled, the gun jerked in my hands. In a matter of seconds I emptied a whole clip into the darkness. There was

a scream, the sound of a falling body, then silence. ."

'Chris?'

His voice was uncharacteristically harsh. 'What are you playing at, Jason? I told you to keep down and keep quiet!' 'Sorry., Shaking his head, Chris took the hot rifle from my hands. 'Now for Goddess' sake stay here and stay quiet, like I told you.' He moved towards the source of the scream. I held back, more afraid of what he might find there than in deference to his instructions. Chris clambered over a low ridge of rock and disappeared into the gloom. I waited. Nothing. I waited some more. Nothing. Where was Chris? Had there been more than one assailant? Had Chris been captured or killed? Should I go and help?

While I dithered there was the sound of someone moving in the darkness.

'Chris?'

'It's OK. It's me.'

'Did you find out what was -'

'Yes. You shot a sheep.'

After a moment I realized I was laughing. 'I shot a -?'

Chris put his finger to his lips. 'Jason, shut up. We still have to find out who

-

He was cut off by a terrible scream from the crater behind us. This time the scream was clearly human. A woman's scream.

'Bernice!' I turned and began to stumble over the rocks towards the sound.

I scrambled up the low ridge of dirt and rubble caused by the explosion, my head whirling with nightmare thoughts. Bernice. That scream. Why hadn't we seen her there? What were they doing to her?

The scream went on for what seemed like for ever, before dissolving into gulping, agonized breaths. At the top of the ridge I hesitated. What if it was her. What if she was dying? How was I going to deal with that? What was I going to -

Chris pushed past me then, scrambled down into the crater. I followed as if dragged in the wake of a large ship. We reached the block seconds apart?

Chris grabbed my leg and boosted me on to the top, then leapt upwards himself, grabbed the edge and swung himself up.

We crouched in the darkness, listening.

The gulping noises had reduced to a terrified whimper. Now they rose once again into a terrible scream. The scream went on for about as long as I could hold my breath before lapsing once more into the awful, gulping breaths.

I peered into the gloom. The block stretched out before us, a pale shelf against the darker rubble beyond. About twenty feet away something moved in the darkness. The sound of someone moving - no, writhing. The scream came again? The body jerked.

'Bernice?'

Gulping breaths. 'Benny? Is that you?'

A ragged half scream.

The breathing lured me forward. Dimly I was aware of Chris moving slowly, circling the body, hugging the edge of the block. I moved slowly forward in a crouch. Right then I wished I had a gun more than anything else in the whole world.

'Benny? It's Jason. I'm here to help.'

Just the agonized breathing. And a smell. Something sharp, painful. I sneezed once, twice; the smell was gone.

I moved closer to the figure. I reached out a hand to touch it, snatched the hand back with a cry.

'Jason, you all right?'

Chris - his voice tight and low in the darkness.

'My bloody hand. It burns. There's something on the body. There's something on it Chris. Acid. Something. Christ, that hurts.'

Chris worked his way closer. I sat down and waited for him to arrive. It seemed to take him for ever to cross the few metres that separated

us.

When he got close he examined my hand as well as he could in the gloom.

'You're right? Smells like hydrochloric acid. A weak solution.' A moment.

'We need water. There'll be some in the chopper. Can you reach it?'

'I'm not going anywhere. I have to know.'

If it's Bernice that's dying right in front of me. Chris nodded, moved closer to the body. 'Don't touch her!'

'Don't worry.'

The sound of breathing intensified then, just for a moment. As if someone was drawing breath.

'- infected -'

The voice was rough, gurgling, unmistakably female. Chris stopped a few feet from the body. 'Can you hear me? You have acid bums.'

'- virus -'

'You must stay still. We'll get -'

'- infected - '

I went cold. Something in that whispering death-voice made me want to scream and run. My hand was burning. I felt sick. My arm was burning.

Something metallic fell with a clinking noise on to the block.

'-serum -'

'What is it? Chris? What did she drop?'

'It's a hypospray. A medical hypospray.'

'What does she mean - infection?'

'I don't know.'

'Chris ... my arm's killing me. Not just my hand. It's spreading. And I

feel sick. I can't - I gasped for breath. My skin was on fire. I rubbed the sleeve of my jacket. It just made the pain worse. 'Chris! Jesus, it feels like my arm's on fire!'

'- two doses. Thought I could contain spread of . . . use hypo or you'll -' Her voice was an agonized whisper. Through my own pain I wondered how she could hold it together enough to speak rationally at all, let alone give advice.

Suddenly I leapt forward, wrenching off my jacket and flinging it away as I went. I groped for Chris in the darkness. I found him, wrenched the hypospray from his grasp, pressed it against my arm and triggered a dose.

My arm went numb.

I fell over, fought the urge to be sick. 'Chris - seems to have -'

I was sick then.

Chris picked up the hypo, turned to inject the woman.

'- no! Too late for . . . contagion! Infection! Inject yourself or -'

Another scream.

Dimly I was aware of Chris hovering, uncertain in the darkness. 'For Christ's sake! Give her the serum! Bernice -'

'We don't know it's -'

'- only one dose. I'm a vector! Inject yourself. Kill me -'

'Chris! Dose her!'

'Jason shut up!'

'- shoot me -'

'Chris it's Benny!'

'What if she's right?'

'-please -'

'What if I'm -'

'- kill me -'

'- infected I'll -'

A scream. A terrible scream. Not her. Me.

Chris injected himself.

I crawled towards Chris. I don't know what I intended to do. Hit him? Hurt him? Something. I could hardly move. He was on his knees, fighting the urge to be sick, gun drawn, placed at her head. Oh God. No. Not that. Not Benny, Not my Benny. Please not that! Her voice was a whisper, her plea for death a wet gurgle.

'Chris, it's Benny. Don't shoot her!'

'Christ, Jason, she's dying can't you see that? Smell it?'

He repositioned the gun.

I collapsed, arms outstretched, hands inches from him. The ground seemed to shake underneath me.

The woman moved, I thought I saw her hand curl around the gun to hold it in place against her head. The gun began to smoke. Her voice was quiet now, almost inaudible. But her body was making other sounds. Other melting sounds.

Chris's finger tightened on the trigger. He was going to do it. Oh Benny, he was going to -

The night lit up around us? Torches. Figures in spacesuits with lighted helmets, guns and sprays shooting clouds of ice-cold, choking moisture.

One of the figures seemed to have three eyes.

I looked across at Benny in the light from the torches, and almost screamed again.

It wasn't her.

It was horrible. The woman was in her fifties. She was wearing what looked like a pressure suit. Her hands and face were exposed? Blisters covered almost half her visible skin surface. The rest was blotched. Some was peeling away. Her eyes were squeezed tightly shut. Shiny tears emerged from the corners and cut smoking tracks through her

cheeks.

But she wasn't Benny. Wasn't Benny! She could still be alive. I felt an overwhelming sense of relief.

Then the woman opened her eyes and stared up at Chris. I gasped. One eye was almost intact; the other was a mess of milky fluid and blood. She grasped the gun more firmly, her gaze locked on Chris. 'Shoot me. Kill me.

Now. Please. Please!' She coughed blood. The coughing turned into another scream. 'Please!'

But Chris could only stare? The gun shook in his hand. In both their hands.

The barrel smoked as acid attacked it. Chris muttered something - I thought I heard him say Roz Forrester's name.

But still he waited.

'I can't,' he muttered.

'God almighty, Chris, she's in agony! For God's sake do as she says!'

Chris seemed about to answer but was interrupted as a voice boomed in the darkness?

'DROP THE GUN. THIS IS NATO COMMANDER JEREMY FIELDING. I HAVE AUTHORIZATION TO USE LETHAL FORCE TO RECOVER THIS

ARTEFACT. I REPEAT: DROP THE GUN AND MOVE AWAY FROM THE

BODY OBEY NOW OR WE OPEN FIRE.'

Chris hesitated another moment, then put the gun down. The fact that his own skin must be burning as well seemed not to register.

The figures approached then. All we could do was watch them put the gun and the woman into separate plastic bags and carry them away?

I seemed to hear her moans in my head for a long while after she was gone.

They put us into a big military chopper and flew us out of the area? We flew for a short distance and then landed. We were taken out of

the chopper -

which was then sprayed heavily with what was obviously some kind of very strong industrial disinfectant - and from there marched towards a tracked vehicle.

The vehicle was obviously some kind of mobile HQ. It was wide and tall, with independent motors on either side to drive four sets of treads. It looked like nothing more than four double-size tanks connected by a rigid structure of gantries and Quonset huts. It must have been fifty metres wide, twice that long and about two storeys high. Spotlights and instrument packages were bolted haphazardly to the frame. An uplink antenna clunked slowly around on the vehicle's roof, pointing at the sky. I wondered at that for a moment - then realized that the vehicle was moving forward, very slowly, chewing its way across the floodlit rock, overhanging the road on either side by many metres. I wondered why we hadn't seen it when we'd overflown the area. Then as we were marched up to the entrance I saw a huge helicopter land and disgorge another mobile section from its cargo area. The section snuggled up to the front of the vehicle and was clamped in place. The helicopter flew off.

We were taken to an airlock; our clothes were removed and we were sprayed with disinfectant. The clothes were put into sterile bags marked with LEVEL FIVE: HOT MATERIAL stickers. I nodded to Chris. Thinking back to South Africa, I said, 'Level One is safe. Level Four is the Ebola virus. No known antidote.' He nodded but said nothing. The bags were taken away by suited figures.

After the decontamination we were taken along a corridor lined with UV

lights and irradiated. After that came a number of injections. After that a skin scrub. After that we were forced to inhale a pink gas that made me sick. The vomit was placed into bottles marked LEVEL FIVE: HOT

MATERIAL and taken away. After that the whole process was repeated.

'I\vice.

Disinfection apparently concluded, we were led to a room which resembled a miniature hospital ward, given a set of plastic coveralls and shoes and left to our own devices. We waited there an hour, while the floor swayed gently underneath us with the motion of the vehicle.

When the hour was up four suited figures came in and gave me the most thorough and embarrassing medical I had ever been subjected to.

Finally, two hours after my original infection, if that's what it was, doctors, if that's who they were, treated me with painkillers and alkaline solution for the acid bums on my hand.

About once every five minutes during this process I demanded loudly to know if they had found Benny, where she was, if she was still alive, what was happening to her.

Apart from directing terse medical questions at us, nobody spoke a single word during the entire time we were being examined.

Their examination complete, the doctors left the room. While we were dressing another suited figure entered. The name FIELDING, E? J.

appeared on a name badge. I peered through the visor of his helmet.

Fielding was grey-haired, green-eyed. He looked very tired. Or perhaps very scared. He put a LEVEL FIVE: HOT MATERIAL bottle containing what seemed to be vomit down on the table in front of us. He took off his helmet, folded it neatly and placed it in a pocket of the suit. Then he unlatched the top of the HOT MATERIAL bottle and opened the lid.

'You're not infected. Your clothes are contaminated to Level Five and lethal, but you're not infected. You care to explain that?'

So we told him all about it. Well, I told him all about it. Chris said nothing.

Neither of us mentioned the Doctor. We just told him we were part of an archaeological expedition investigating possible resting sites of Noah's Ark.

I told him I was married and demanded to know if his people had found Bernice.

'Bernice?'

'Yes! Bernice Summerfield. My wife. I want to go and look for her.'

'Well you can't. We have a situation here, in case you hadn't noticed. A Level Five situation.' The way he said 'Level Five' drove a spike of fear right up into the base of my brain. I shuddered.

'I don't care! I have to =

'I couldn't give a brass monkey's balls what you "have to ", Mister!'

Fielding's voice snapped out like a whip. 'This is the deal: I am in charge.

You do as I tell you. Non-compliance will be met with lethal force. Do you understand?'

I nodded slowly, trying to hold back tears. It was all just too much.

Chris said, 'You've told us we're not infected. Not infected with what? I'm trained in forensics. Perhaps I can help you.' Fielding sighed. 'Forensics? A copper, eh? They say when cops go bad they're the worst. Well, you can help all right. But I guarantee you won't enjoy it.'

He spoke into a microphone. Another figure entered the ward. A huge figure that dwarfed even Chris, with three eyes and green skin. I studied the Earth Reptile quietly. 'I didn't think you guys were moving openly in society yet,' I said by way of an opening gambit.

It was a dumb thing to say. Fielding jumped on it immediately? 'Imorkal, I want you to interrogate these two. Find out how they know sensitive information like that. Find out how they come to be immune when their clothes are lethal. Do it fast. We're depending on you.'

Imorkal nodded thoughtfully, his crest dipping. His central third eye opened slightly, peering at us with cold intelligence? Imorkal looked at Chris. He fell over. The gaze raked over him. Chris was gibbering quietly. I realized he was telling them everything that had happened to us, everything we had done since he had arrived in Turkey. Chris shut up. It wasn't enough.

Imorkal turned his gaze on me. I felt something reach into my mind. Felt a presence there. Something cold, inhuman, terrifying. Something that reached into my memories and dragged them out so that I experienced every moment of the last few weeks in excruciating detail, love, fear, hope, terror, all crammed into a few minutes' garbled mumbling?

When it was over I sat on the floor, shaking, trying desperately to get my breath back.

Imorkal turned to Fielding. 'They know little. They are here by accident?

They are immune because they were given the serum. They are telling the truth. They are not terrorists? They are innocent.'

'Is there any more serum?' 'They are not aware of any.'

'And the hypo was empty.' Fielding thought for a moment. 'All right. Thanks, Imorkal. And look - I'm really sorry about Liz. You know we'll save her if we can.'

Imorkal nodded? There seemed to be a significance to the exchange which I couldn't fathom. But then I was going to have difficulty working anything out for a while after the going over I'd just had.

Fielding issued a few more orders. A number of orderlies came in and helped us on to the beds. One of them was quite pretty. I was beginning to feel better already; attention from a pretty orderly couldn't help but speed up the process?

When we were settled, Fielding said, 'All right. Sony to have been so harsh on you. We've made a mistake here. We need to sort a few things out.' He seemed to make a decision. 'All right. Answers then. But first, I'm sure you want something to eat? Orderly, I'd like tea and some food brought to OpCon. Oh, and will you please remove that vomit before we have to fumigate the place? It smells like something crawled in here and died.'

OpCon was located on the upper deck and comprised one room filling what must have been fully a third of the available space in that deck. Here the vehicle's motion was exaggerated. The front part of the room looked very much like the inside of a spacecraft: consoles, operators, the quiet hum of machinery and the odd curse as someone spilt their coffee. The rear section, partitioned by movable screens took the form of a classroom, with half a dozen small desk-chair combos facing a bank of monitor screens and, incongruously, a blackboard mounted on a wooden easel.

Fielding led us through the forward section, getting reports as he went.

'- ground stable. Reaction negative -'

'- proceeding north north east. Rate three KPH -' '- ground stable. Reaction negative -'

'- sensor sweeps indicate biological infection total =

'- human life signs negative. Terrestrial life signs negative -

'- ground sensors on red one. Reaction positive A sudden flurry of activity?

'- elevated sulphur levels? Elevated carbon monoxide levels -'

'- me the damn coordinates =

'- ground reaction accelerating by mass '- where the hell is it -'

'- all around us. It's everydamnwhere it's -

'- going to -

'- deploy belly shielding -

'- reaction off the scale -'

'- the hell out of here -

'- gonna have to ride -'

'- it's going to blow it's going to -'

There was a tremendous explosion somewhere off to one side? The ground shuddered and the HQ shuddered with it. Fielding ignored the shaking, motioned us through to the rear section.

The shaking subsided, the ground stopped swaying and HQ plodded on forward.

'Was that the Iraqis or the Iranians?' I asked, feeling stupid and scared.

Fielding frowned. 'Neither. It was Agent Yellow.'

'Agent Yellow as in James Bond Agent Yellow?'

Fielding did not respond to my sarcasm. Just as well. I didn't feel like a sparring match.

Chris said slowly, That was a ground effect. An earthquake. Explosions that small don't cause earthquakes.'

I shuddered. 'Explosions that small?'

Fielding looked grim. 'If our graphs are correct that was just a baby.'

I felt like grabbing someone and shaking them, felt like screaming or running out of there and never stopping. I managed to control the reaction with an effort, but it took me a while. In that time, Fielding went to the blackboard, picked up a piece of chalk and wrote: 2CaSO4 --> 2Ca20 + 2S + 203

X

He underlined the X heavily.

'Listen up. School's in? Anyone understand this?'

Chris looked puzzled. I shook my head.

'What about this?' Fielding wiped some yellow dust from the blackboard beneath the original equation and wrote:

2CaCO3 --> 2Ca20 + 2CO

X

Chris said, '2CO' That's carbon monoxide?'

'Correct. These equations describe a reaction taking place in the local rock strata. Both reactions are impossible under normal conditions.' He tapped the board by the underlined X. 'Mister X here is a by-product of Agent Yellow. It catalyses an otherwise impossible reaction. The result is that sulphur is liberated from the local rock in crystal form. Lots of sulphur.'

'And the rock?'

'Becomes extremely unstable?' Fielding tapped the part of the equation that seemed to be composed of a worrying amount of oxygen symbols. A tiny puff of yellow powder leapt into the air; he waved it away. 'Explosive, in fact.'

Chris let out a breath: 'What about Mister X?. Where's it coming from?'

Fielding shrugged. 'As far as we can tell Mister X itself is one by-product of another impossible reaction. This one taking place within local biological matter.'

I went cold. 'You mean people?'

'People. Sheep. Plants. Anything biological. Anything with terrestrial DNA is being changed.'

I felt close to panic. 'I don't understand? We just came here to look for Noah's Ark. What are you trying to tell us?' Chris told me to shut up. 'I told you this was serious.' He switched his attention back to Fielding. 'You say terrestrial DNA is being changed. Into what?'

Fielding shrugged? 'We don't know. Think of the Ebola virus: seven molecules, three of them unknown. Millions of possible combinations.

Thousands of strains? Here we're dealing with thousands of molecules, only a few of them familiar to us. And the whole lot's changing - hell, evolving - at a rate science tells us is impossible?'

I thought back to South Africa, to the hospital in Mulobizi. All those people bleeding out, becoming brain-dead sacks of infectious matter, becoming the actual virus itself. The woman we had found was bleeding out too - only she was bleeding acid.

'Well, where does this Agent Yellow come from? How do we stop it?'

Fielding wiped the blackboard with a rubber, erasing both equations with a single stroke, allowing another cloud of yellow dust into the air.

'The answer to both questions is: I have no idea. The only person who does is currently in isolation. Dying.'

The lab was located one level down, in a box-shaped structure held between the rear traction units? We walked down a narrow observation corridor until we came to a window. I stared through the thick glass into the isolation lab. The woman we had found lay on a metal table. She was still alive. The walls of the unit didn't quite block her screams.

With her in the lab were a number of suited technicians - one of them Imorkal. Their suits were connected by flexible plastic tunnels to the outside. The lab had its own environment - they were obviously taking no chances with contamination.

I let my gaze travel to the table. What lay on top was barely recognizable as human. Parts of the skin were gone, exposing muscle and, in the case of her left thigh, the bone. Tracts of skin along the side of the face had been stripped away. Her clothes were gone. I noticed the table on which she lay was smoking intermittently as acid from her body ate into the surface.

I glanced at Chris. The sight obviously left him shaken. He could have

ended her torment in the moment before Fielding's people had taken over.

He hadn't. I tried to imagine how he must be feeling now. I failed.

Thankfully.

'What's happening to her?' Chris's voice was a whisper. Fielding said quietly, 'We're not sure. Several reactions are taking place in her body.

Calcium sulphate is being reduced to calcium oxide and sulphur. The sulphur is poisoning her as it replaces the oxygen in her system. Somehow sulphur dioxide is forming in there, and when it combines with water - for example in her eyes - it turns to sulphuric acid.' Fielding took a breath, looked away for a moment and then back. 'The doctors are trying to keep her alive using sodium hypochlorate and organic alkaline in combination, both externally and internally.'

'For God's sake, why?' Chris's voice boomed in the confined space of the observation corridor. 'Can't you see she's in agony?'

'I should imagine she's in hell. But she's the only one who knows how to make the serum.'

I looked back into the lab, at Imorkal, staring down at the dying woman, remembered him yanking information from my brain as I might take a toy from a naughty child. They were keeping her alive in the hope he could reach in and get the formula before she died. In the moment I realized this I also detected that she was looking at me. No. She was looking at Chris.

Her eyelids were gone now, one eye was

missing as well. The other stared fixedly at Chris. Her mouth moved in a series of jerks. The commsystem brought the gurgling remains of her voice to us. '- bastard - cuh - killed -

You bastard, you could have killed me.

I looked away, said, 'Can't you take blood from us? We're cured.,

'That was the first thing the doctors did. We have a solution which slows the rate of infection somewhat; but that only delays the inevitable.'

'The inevitable what?' I had a good idea what the answer might be.

Fielding didn't disappoint me.

'The inevitable infection of the entire Earth.'

I blinked. The sentence was simple. Direct. Yet it meant nothing to me.

Fielding could have been describing a Neapolitan ice cream for all the effect it had on me. Chris was breathing fast. He was staring through the glass into the isolab. He seemed distant. I had never seen him scared before. At least I assumed he was scared. I was beyond terror. So I thought.

Chris licked his lips. 'I've seen this before. It's a terraforming virus. It's programmed to use what it can from an environment to recreate another.

Creation and destruction all at once.'

Fielding seemed about to speak when a red light flashed above the window. At the same time a siren cut loose.

A recorded voice said mildly, 'Attention. Seal breach in isolab One. Seal breach in isolab One. Evacuate adjoining areas. Repeat. Evacuate adjoining areas. Please remain calm.'

I noticed the personnel within the room go into an immediate panic. Too late. The doors their pressure suits were connected to slammed shut, sealing the tunnels to prevent exposure to the lab environment. It was obviously a measure designed to maintain the integrity of the lab and quarantine the doctors in case of infection. It did no good. In a matter of seconds their suits were blooming with yellow crystals.

I watched them begin to die.

One fetched up against the window. His suit was sprinkled with yellow crystals. Yellow powder puffed into the air as he hit the glass? The radio brought his voice to us clear as a bell. 'It's hot! The acid is hot! It's infectious! Get the hell out and sterilize! Do it now before - The technician fell out of view. His face mask was melting from the inside. The scream was cut off as the radio circuit broke, remaining only distantly through the window. Distant but growing louder as the glass melted.

And as the glass melted a figure smashed its way through. Imorkal. He seemed unharmed, but his breath hissed painfully in his throat.

The recorded voice added mildly; 'Attention. Seal breach in isolab One.

Seal breach in isolab One. All adjoining areas are now hot. All adjoining areas are now hot. Sealing the lab unit for self-destruct sequence. Please remain calm. Your cooperation is appreciated.'

Beside us Fielding suddenly fell against the wall, a moan building in his throat.

'Get us ... out ... now...'

Chris and I grabbed an arm each. His clothes were beginning to burn. The air stank of acid fumes. My skin was on fire again. We staggered down the corridor with Fielding between us. Halfway to the end the door began to close. Imorkal moved ahead and blocked it. Motors whined then shorted out. The door froze.

The recorded voice said, 'Attention. Seal breach in isolation section. Main thoroughfare is now hot. Main thoroughfare is now hot. In accordance with regulation Zero-Zero-One-Alpha this vehicle will now be targeted for sterilization by nuclear device. Please remain calm. Your cooperation is appreciated.'

'Did you get it? The formula for the serum?' Fielding's voice was a harsh croak.

Imorkal nodded slowly. He seemed dazed. 'She is dead.'

Fielding said in a cracked whisper, 'We'll all be dead if that serum doesn't get to safe hands.'

'I am dying. More slowly than a human would but the process is inevitable.'

Fielding thought about that for all of thirty seconds. 'Get me to OpCon!' He coughed. 'Now!' Imorkal plucked him from our hands and strode off along the corridor.

OpCon was a mess of panicking technicians. Half the consoles had sprouted flowers of yellow crystal. I felt dizzy. The oxygen content of the air was shooting up. And there was a chemical stink I recognized as sulphur dioxide. Before long what happened to the rocks outside was going to happen here. As we watched a technician screamed and collapsed; bled acid out into her suit. Electrical systems blew out in a mess of sparks and smoke. Sprinklers activated immediately. The

screams increased as the water mixed with sulphur compounds in the air to form acid? The stink was awful.

Fielding fought for air, told Imorkal to take him to the command console.

Panels in the low ceiling sprang open and breathing masks popped out?

Imorkal grabbed a mask each for himself and Fielding. I followed suit. The oxygen supply tasted of sulphur.

At the console, Fielding input some commands, brought the radio on line.

'Open Channel D. Authorization Fielding Zero-Zero-One-Beta. Field Command breached. Request urgent, repeat urgent, sterilization of this base and surrounding land to a radius of sixty miles by nuclear device.

Condition Black, repeat Condition Black. Agent Yellow is on the move. I say again, Agent Yellow is on the-' Fielding coughed. Blood sprayed out from behind the breathing mask. Water from the sprinklers sprayed over him. He choked back a scream, stared at Imorkal. 'You have to get the formula out.

You know that.'

Imorkal nodded.

Fielding looked at Chris and gasped, ' "Creation and destruction, all at once." It's not a virus. It's God.' He choked up the lining of his throat in a spray of blood.

Imorkal opened his third eye and looked at Fielding with absolute compassion. Fielding convulsed once and died, right there before us, in Imorkal's arms. If he'd lived another thirty seconds he would have heard a tinny voice on the radio confirm a full thermonuclear strike for thirty-one minutes' time.

Chris looked away.

Imorkal put Fielding down carefully, almost tenderly. I pulled Chris towards the airlock.

The HQ tore itself to pieces as we ran, blew apart moments after we

pushed through the main airlock and into the night. For several minutes it rained bits of sulphur, bits of metal and bits of human bodies. Or what might have been human bodies. It was hard to tell. We dodged pieces of heavy machinery already blossoming with their own yellow stains. By now Imorkal was stumbling too. And Chris looked as if he'd been hit over the head with a two-by-four. At one point he half turned, stood staring as a burning jeep caught in the explosion, bounced across the road towards him. I pushed him out of the way a second before the jeep tore past in a gout of flame and yellow crystals and dissolving metal shrapnel.

Chris still wasn't going to move. 'Chris. Get up will you!' I pointed to the only chopper left on the ground. It was the one we had arrived on; parked, engine idling, a few hundred metres away beside the road. 'Chris,' I said again, urgently. 'The chopper.'

'Roz,' Chris said slowly, quietly. 'Roz, I'm sorry. I promised myself I wouldn't feel guilty. That was selfish of me. I should have known better than that?'

I punched him in the side of the face. Now was no time for guilt. We had to move or die. I told him this. He ignored me. I hit him again. Nothing. I glanced at my watch. Twenty-seven minutes to detonation.

'Chris we have to get out of here and we have to go right now!'

I was on the point of risking another punch when Chris began to move. He began to jog, then to sprint. Boy, could he move. I ran to keep up.

Then I realized: he was running towards the still-burning HQ.

I stopped. 'No, Chris, not that way! You'll - It was useless. He was gone. Oh God. Had he lost it? Gone to kill himself in some hopeless act of redemption? As if I didn't have enough to worry about!

Another explosion ripped through the vehicle.

I turned away. By the light of the fire I could see someone waving to us from the chopper. The pilot. He was waiting for us. No? He wasn't waving, he was convulsing. He fell, choking, from view. A moment later sparks flickered inside the chopper and it erupted into a ball of flame.

I think I screamed then. I certainly lost it for a while. I came to when the roar of a jeep's engine sounded beside me. Chris was sitting at the

wheel.

His face was a blank mask. I thought he was going to drive straight by for a moment. Then he slammed on the brakes. I piled in. We drove on, caught up with Imorkal, and he joined us, his weight making the vehicle sag alarmingly. The jeep was already blooming with flaky yellow stains. It stank like a kid's chemistry set.

Chris drove on. I realized he was heading the wrong way again. Without bothering to speak I pushed him out of the driver's seat. The jeep slewed, but stayed level. Imorkal pulled Chris into the back seat and I took over the driver's position. I turned the jeep around and slammed it into first. Our only hope now was to drive back the way we had come. Back to our own chopper? That was going to take a while. What the hell! We had twenty-six minutes to detonation. All the time in the world?

The jeep coughed and died five minutes later. I grabbed Chris and pulled him clear as the vehicle slumped into a mass of yellow crystals. It jerked suddenly, as the fuel system ignited. Yellow dust blew over us. I choked. I dragged

Chris on up the slopes of the mountain. I suddenly stopped. Imorkal! Where was -

He was right behind me, moving fast but jerkily, hissing with pain. He was tough, no doubt about it. But even he was going under. Patches of scabby yellow coated his scales? Parts of his body issued frothy yellow slime. A haze of brown gas lifted from his arms and back.

I could see the chopper up ahead now. We reached it with nineteen minutes left to detonation. My head was spinning with calculations. Time to start the engine, to lift off and attain maximum velocity. We might just get out of the killzone. If we were lucky.

We reached the chopper.

I pulled Chris towards the cockpit. He went without protest but seemed able to make no move of his own? He certainly didn't want to climb in. He just gazed stupidly at me, like a kid who can't understand how to fix a broken toy.

'Get in!' I screamed. 'Only you can fly the damn thing! If you don't get in we're dead!'

He didn't move.

Eighteen minutes to detonation.

'Imorkal! Help me!' The Earth Reptile moved closer, opened his third eye and looked at Chris.

Chris jerked as if electrocuted. His eyes opened wide, rolled, then settled into the familiar quiet expression I knew? 'All right, Roz. Quit riding me, I'm going.'

I shook my head at the sound of his words. He was definitely losing it. 'Get in the cockpit! Get in, Chris! You lost it for a bit but you're OK now and we have to get out of here, right now, before the nukes go off!'

Which was due to happen in seventeen minutes. He just nodded, began to climb into the cockpit.

He had his foot on the first step when Samran emerged from behind the fuselage. His face was half gone but his gun arm was intact, the gun, fuming from acid bums, pointing right at my head.

He smiled and the skin of his jaw slid quietly away in a runnel of blood and fumes. He was a Level Five nightmare, bleeding acid out from every visible surface, obviously terminal. I don't know how he could stand, let alone speak. But speak he did, in a very bad American accent. 'Gimme a ride, buddy?'

He began to laugh and cough blood.

His finger tightened on the gun's trigger.

Chris stepped in front of me and punched Samran hard. He did it without thinking, his fist a blur in the night. Samran's face made a noise like a bag of crisps splitting open. Chris's arm went right through his head, out and back, before I could even draw a breath.

Chris bent double with pain from the acid burns Samran's face had imparted to his fist, and Samran's first and only shot - fired more by reflex than design - went over his head.

In another moment we were in the chopper. Chris cut the preflights, goosed the engine and we took off. In less than a minute we were airborne. Ice-cold air rushed past my face. Above us umber clouds swirled, glowing yellow and brown. The Moon was up there somewhere but all I could see were the clouds, glowing with their own terrible light.

I looked down? The ground was tumbling away beneath us. A couple of miles away the wrecked HQ was burning, sending yellow and blue gouts of flame shooting upwards. I could see the reaction of Agent Yellow spreading out into the nearby rocks. They were beginning to bubble like lava, sending puffs of inflammable gases into the air. The gases caught light. The flames spread. The rock itself was burning. More yellow clouds lifted into the air.

I yelled into the night. My voice was lost in the chopper's engine noise but I didn't care. We'd made it. I'd made it. We were going to -

I stopped. Suddenly I felt like throwing up. Bernice. In the panic I'd forgotten about her. God, how could I have done that? I'd left her behind!

The woman I loved, who I'd forced Chris out here at gunpoint to rescue! I'd left her behind!

I was about to mention this when I realized the chopper was descending.

What was Chris playing at? Had he frozen up again? Leaving Imorkal in the passenger section I scrambled back to the cockpit. Chris was fine. 'We'll be landing at Dogubayazit in a few seconds?'

'For God's sake, why?'

'Because we can't leave them behind, that's why?'

I wanted to argue, to yell, to rant and beat my chest. I did none of these things because the chopper smacked into the ground at this point. Right back where it all started. Back to square one.

With eleven minutes left to live.

Dogubayazit was a ghost village, illuminated only by the sickly light of Agent Yellow, creeping steadily towards us through the rocks, through the very air I was breathing.

The village was deserted. Beside the hotel door was a puddle of organic remains about the size of a small child. A dog? A goat? I caught a glimpse of something that looked suspiciously like a Filofax caught in the mess and simply refused to think about it any more.

Pinned to the door of the hotel above the body was a note from the Doctor.

Gone to Oktemberyan. Last bus for Noah's Ark leaves tonight. Don't be late.

'Don't be late! Jesus!' '

I was running for the chopper even as I spoke, crumpled in my hand. Chris was close behind me. had been in too much pain to leave the chopper.

In another moment we were airborne again, flying east. Consulting a map he had found in the dashboard, Chris told me Oktemberyan was a small peak about six minutes' flight time away.

I looked at my watch?

Eight minutes until detonation.

- - -

Three minutes into the flight the chopper began to shake. Something was grinding hard in the engine? In the passenger compartment Imorkal was getting really sick. His skin was smoking. Pieces were starting to peel away. The process seemed to be taking longer with him - something to do with his species' DNA I suppose. I didn't care. I had all I could cope with just fighting for breath. I opened the passenger door. The wind whipped in, yanked a bunch of loose trash out into the night. Beneath us yellow light bloomed. Explosions. Thermals bounced us around like a paper model.

The air stank. I saw the ground rippling like water. Large areas where the ground simply puffed up like a bubble, then sank with a roar, emitting huge clouds of sulphur and gouts of flame. The whole area was turning into what looked like a volcano. An infectious volcano.

The chopper rocked in the updraught from a particularly devastating explosion. Imorkal reeled, emitted a thin whine. I smelt the acrid stink of dissolving metal. 'Electrical systems buried in the floor sparked and caught light. I grabbed a fire extinguisher, sprayed the exposed area of circuitry.

The acid left a hundred sites of infection in its wake.

Imorkal gasped, 'Listen. Must listen. Formula. Tell you. Now?' He began to recite a number of extremely complex sounding chemical equations. I stood helplessly, hanging on to one of the ceiling straps as the chopper thrashed its way through the tumbling air. Not one word

he said made any sense to me.

'I'm sorry. I don't have the training -'

He managed to wave a hand at me. There was something eerie about that hand. About its three fingers, its opposable thumb. Something at once familiar and alien. It gave me the creeps. Imorkal looked at me then. Two of his eyes were steaming puddles. His third eye opened and immediately came under attack by acid fumes. He jerked. He stared at me. I couldn't look away. He was. He was ... Oh God no please get out - he was putting something - out of my head get out of my - he was putting something into my - stop hitting me like that Daddy, no, please, no not again not - in my head he was putting something into my -

I fell away with a scream. The race fear. I'd read about this. You'd think I was immune, the number of places I'd been, the amount of aliens I'd met.

But no. Here it was. The fear. The old fear of mankind. My fear. Of them. I blinked. I saw crystal cities, terrible violence, intelligence repressed, tortured and killed for sport and children's games. I saw an empty sky, I saw the Stranger loom there, larger every sleeping time, I saw devastation on an incalculable scale as oceans rose to swamp plains and pull down cities and mountains alike, the Judgement of God, the flood.

I screamed.

The Earth screamed.

The Stranger locked into orbit. They slept and we awoke.

Beneath a shining Moon, we awoke.

I opened my eyes. Imorkal was dead. Whatever he was trying to tell me was gone. If it was the formula, that was now lost forever. His body bled acid out into the deck. The passenger compartment erupted with flame.

More flames licked at the fuselage, mirrors to the erupting ground beneath.

I could do nothing for Imorkal. He was dead. I scrambled back towards the cockpit.

Chris fought the stick. Smoke was pouring out of the flight controls.

Beneath us, explosions ripped the night. Rock flung itself past, an upside-down rain of death.

Barely visible through the clouds of gas and smoke ahead was a low hill.

There was a light on top. It was flashing. The TARDIS.

The light seemed to be growing even faster than our speed of approach would have made possible. I shook my head. Delirious. Shock. Could anyone blame me? I checked my watch. One minute to detonation.

Chris shoved the stick forward. The chopper tilted downward. We dived for the light. It was definitely bigger. And

now there was another light beneath it, much larger, rectangular. The doors were open.

'What are you doing?' My voice wasn't so much edged with panic as smothered with it. 'You have to slow down, not accelerate!'

Chris was very calm. 'No. The light. Morse code. I know what I'm doing.'

'We're going to crash!' 'We have to trust him.'

I did not have the strength to argue any more. Benny was gone. Liz was gone. Fielding was gone. Imorkal was gone. Agent Yellow is on the move.

Sorry, Benny. Condition Black. Repeat, Condition Black I tried. But it's so hard when Agent Yellow is, on the move and the night is on fire and I'm sorry because the Earth is burning and it's not a virus it's God and I'm sorry Benny, sorry I left you behind and sorry for Paris so sorry because I love you and -

Thirty seconds before we hit the ground Chris vented the chopper's remaining fuel and took her in on a dead stick. Twenty seconds before we hit the ground I saw that the TARDIS was definitely bigger.

Ten seconds before we hit the ground it began to dissolve beneath us.

Rocks blew upwards, severing the rotors, punching holes in the engine, the airframe, the fuselage. A stunted tree flew past spilling

acid rain. We hit the ground, pancaked, slid sideways towards the fast-growing TARDIS.

Behind me I was aware of a brilliant

the bombs the bombs have gone off they've

light. A thunderclap of air lifted the chopper and threw us into the air, just enough to clear the control console as we hurtled through the rugby-goalpost-sized doors into the Ship, burst through the even larger door in the inner wall at a height of thirty feet and crashed sideways into a swimming pool the size of a lake filled with crash foam.

Agent Yellow beat us out of the wreckage. By the time we were on the side of the pool the tiles were stained yellow and the foam was coughing sulphur compounds in thick gouts. The fire in the chopper was out and it sank slowly to the bottom of the pool, just the tail fin and a single bent rotor blade emerging to drip yellow crystals into the foam.

I pulled Chris past a couple of palm trees into a vestibule. The Doctor wasn't there. Behind us the infection was eating at the pool. Tiles and concrete cracked, burst apart in a flood of oxygen? The palms began to dissolve. I got dizzy fast. We ran out of the vestibule into the console room.

It was definitely larger than when I had last seen it. I got a confused glimpse of people: villagers, soldiers, children. I recognized Iapeth and Dilaver's uncle. The Doctor was working at the console. He slammed a set of switches when he saw us arrive. 'Anyone else with you?'

I shook my head. 'Good.'

Another set of switches clicked home. The Doctor straightened up with a sigh. 'A shame about the pool. And I'll miss the palms. But we can't have Agent Yellow throwing its weight around in the TARDIS.'

I drew in great gulps of air.

Chris said, 'You deleted the pool?' The Doctor nodded.

My legs gave way and I sat down suddenly. 'The. What. What about the.

Bombs?' I sucked in another breath, managed to get myself together

enough to ask, 'Did it work? Has the area been sterilized? Are we safe?'

The Doctor smiled. 'Oh yes. We're perfectly safe.'

I felt like laughing hysterically. In fact I did. That drew stares from everyone around me. The villagers and soldiers backed off and gave me some space.

I let my laughter subside, I was tired - hell, I was utterly shagged. I looked around at the people. They were still looking at me. I now noticed that mixed up with the people were dogs, goats, a sheep.

I smiled. 'It's a regular ... Noah's Ark you've got here,' I gasped.

The Doctor looked up from where he was working at the console. 'Isn't it?'

He adopted a theatrical pose. ' "And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; the Earth is filled with violence through them, and, behold, I will destroy them with the Earth." ' His expression became grave.

'But there's no need for you to worry, Jason. We're quite safe from the flood in here.'

He was wrong of course. Agent Yellow made it out of the pool before the Doctor deleted that section of TARDIS architecture. We found out only moments later as the cloister bell began to ring. By then we were materializing. Crusty yellow stains began to form on the interior wall as the central console boomed our arrival.

The Doctor opened the exterior doors and said, 'If you would all step outside please, my assistants Jason and Chris will now continue the conducted tour. Thank you. Move along now. Move along, please.' Its voice was quiet but carried to every one of the fifty or so people crowded into the console room. Under any other circumstances it would have been funny.

Chris and I were last out of the TARDIS. When we emerged we found ourselves in a huge spherical chamber. I had just enough time to register the fact that someone lying on the ground a few yards away was screaming madly at me. 'Jason, Jason, come here. I'm paralysed! I can't move!'

'Bernice!' Why was she on the ground? What had happened to her?

'Are you -?'

'I'm OK? But Tammuz has got a gun, he's killing people! He wants to take over the Ark but he doesn't know what he's doing! He'll destroy the world if we don't stop him!'

I lifted her up. I held her. She was cold, her limbs flopped uselessly. I started to cry. 'Jason we haven't got time for this, we have to -

I was interrupted by the sound of gunfire. I looked up. Stupid, I know, but there you go. Tammuz was standing about two hundred metres away. He seemed to be screaming something but his words were lost in echoes. He was firing into the crowd.

One of the soldiers fell. Another returned Tammuz's fire. In moments bullets were flying everywhere.

I became aware that Bernice was screaming beside me: 'Get down! Get down, you'll get shot if you don't -'

A gentle, but very loud voice announced:

'Attention. This is the personality matrix of the Astronomer Royal. This installation has been breached by CarbonOxygen based life form. Infection in progress. Sterilization will commence immediately.'

The air began to fill with a choking gas. Sulphur dioxide. Forty-eight villagers, seven soldiers, three dogs, sixteen chickens and a sheep all tried to get back into the TARDIS at the same time. No good. The doors, stained yellow, were shut. I saw Chris buried under a panicking crowd of people.

Bullets flew everywhere. One ricocheted off the ground a hand's width from my face? Bernice jerked suddenly. Was she hit? I began to panic. If she was hit what could I do? I tried to touch her face. Blood appeared there as if by magic. I realized it was my blood, that I had been shot, not-her, that I had been shot, me, that I was going to

My thoughts were interrupted by a wave of brown gas. I fell to the ground beside my wife and started to choke. Her expression was one of annoyance mixed with frustration? I knew what that look meant. I couldn't love her properly. I couldn't even save her. All I could do now, like everyone around me and everyone else on the Earth, it seemed, was die.

***

GENT****TRANSMISSION***'URGENT****TRANSMISSION****URGENT**

**TRANSMISSI

FROM: DEPT HEALTH GENEVA

TO: WHITE HOUSE EMERGENCY COMMITTEE

TIME: DAY ZERO PLUS THIRTY SIX HOURS

BEGIN TRANSMISSION

*CONDITION BLACK*STOP*AGENT YELLOW ON MOVE*STOP*

*AIRBORNE TRANSMISSION BY NUCLEAR BLAST HAS

ACCELERATED*

*REPEAT ACCELERATED SPREAD OF INFECTION*STOP*

*ISTANBUL*THESSALONIKI*ALMAWSIL*TBILISI*KRASNODAR*INFECTI ON TOTAL*

*HUMAN POPULATION ZERO*STOP*GEOLOGICAL COLLAPSE IN

PROGRESS*STOP*

*INFECTION

SPREADING*ANKARA*BALIKESIR*BURSA*IZMIR*DENIZLI*STOP*

*EXPECTED*PARIS*CAIRO*MOSCOW*BOMBAY*TWENTY FOUR

HOURS*STOP*

*WORLDWIDE EXPOSURE ESTIMATED*THIRTY-SIX HOURS*STOP*

*WORLDWIDE ZERO HUMAN POPULATION ESTIMATED*FORTY-EIGHT HOURS*STOP*

*I'LL TRY TO GET BACK BUT THEY NEED ME HERE*STOP*

*KISS THE KIDS FOR ME*STOP*LOVE YOU*STOP*MAGS*STOP*

END TRANSMISSION

GENT****TRANSMISSION****URGENT****TRANSMISSION****URGENT*

***TRANSMISSI

GENT****TRANSMISSION****URGENT****TRANSMISSION****URGENT'*

***TRANSMISSI

FROM: PRESIDENTIAL OFFICE WHITE HOUSE

TO: MARGARET SPRINGSTEEN DEPT HEALTH GENEVA

DATE: DAY ZERO PLUS THIRTY-EIGHT, HOURS

BEGIN TRANSMISSION

*THEY'RE SAYING ITS MY FAULT*STOP*ARE THEY RIGHT*STOP*I DON'T KNOW ANYMORE*STOP*KIDS ARE IN THE

BUNKERS*STOP*LOVE YOU HONEY*STOP*BRUCE*

STOP

END TRANSMISSION

GENT**'*TRANSMISSION****URGENT'****TRANSMISSION****URGENT*

***TRANSMISSI

URGENT ***DEPT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION*'* **'URGENT**'

!!PROTECT AND SURVIVE!!

AGENT YELLOW

AGENT YELLOW IS NOW ESTABLISHED IN YOUR AREA

SIGNS OF INFECTION INCLUDE

YELLOW POWDER DEPOSITS ON NON-ORGANIC SURFACES

THE SMELL OF ROTTEN EGGS

EARTH TREMORS

SIGNS OF HUMAN INFECTION INCLUDE

THE SMELL OF ROTTEN EGGS

YELLOW POWDER DEPOSITS ON SKIN

FLAKING SKIN

DISSOLVING SKIN OR CLOTHING

VOMITING, CRYING OR BLEEDING CORROSIVE ACID

WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOU ARE INFECTED

* FOR SKIN INFECTIONS USE HOUSEHOLD BLEACH DILUTED 1:5 WITH WARM WATER. APPLY TO INFECTED AREA. DO NOT WASH OFF.

* FOR INTERNAL INFECTIONS USE HOUSEHOLD BLEACH DILUTED 1:20 WITH WARM WATER. ADJUST SOLUTION STRENGTH FOR INDIVIDUAL NEEDS.

* IF INFECTION PERSISTS OR SPREADS INCREASE STRENGTH OF BLEACH SOLUTION.

IF YOU ARE UNSURE ABOUT POSSIBLE INFECTION USE ENCLOSED VOMIT KIT

TO USE THE KIT:

* INGEST BLEACH SOLUTION UNTIL VOMITING OCCURS?

* TRAP SAMPLE OF VOMIT IN TEST TUBE PROVIDED.

* APPLY INDICATOR PAPER AND CHECK COLOR AGAINST COLOR CHART PROVIDED?

!!IMPORTANT I!

A RED COLORATION SIGNIFIES ACID CONTENT COMMENSURATE WITH INFECTION.

DO NOT ASSUME A BLUE COLORATION INSURES SAFETY?

REMEMBER: INFECTION CAN OCCUR AT ANY TIME.

REPEAT THIS CHECK REGULARLY TO INSURE YOU ARE FREE OF

INFECTION.

REMEMBER: ANYONE AND ANYTHING CAN BE A VECTOR.

FRIENDS, FAMILY, HOUSEHOLD PETS, FOOD, CUTLERY, HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE, FAMILY AND PUBLIC VEHICLES, STONE, WOOD, OTHER ORGANIC AND INORGANIC MATERIALS CAN CARRY

THE INFECTION?

!IPROTECT AND SURVIVE!!

URGENT *'*DEPT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION*" ***URGENT***

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Chapter 9

I suppose I'd been lying on the ground for a couple of hours when the Doctor showed up with Jason in tow. That was typical: I'd been working on staying quiet and concentrating on recovering from Liz's taser shock, hoping that as far as Tammuz was concerned it was out of sight and out of mind, when Jason turns up with a football crowd of villagers and half the Turkish army - and a bunch of animals for heaven's sake - who together made a bigger hullabaloo than Springsteen did even before he was elected President.

Of course that was when Tammuz noticed us and began 'spraying bullets everywhere as if they were going out of fashion.

The fact that the Ark itself chose that moment to wake up and try to kill us all was probably just bad luck. But it really felt like someone was out to get me.

By the time the Doctor showed up with an old cardboard box containing a few gramophone records and about a hundred personal force-field units on old wristwatch straps, I as just about ready to quit. I'd been shot at, tasered, and now gassed. I just wanted to call it a day. I felt like I was coughing my lungs up. I didn't want to play the hero any more. I didn't want to second-guess people I thought I knew and then be wrong. I didn't even want to argue with Jason. What I wanted was a beach, some sun block, and a huge mint julep with an alcohol-to-fruit-juice ratio that looked like one of those STEEP HILL warning signs.

Instead I got a personal force-field emitter superglued to a Rolex expandable watch strap, a fifteen-second shiatsu pressure-point workout that had me yelling aloud as life bounced back into my tired, electrocuted old body, and a force-field pressure cuff to staunch my dear husband's newly bullet-punctured arm.

Jason himself was squealing. That was the only word I can use to describe it. And he was muttering something about not being able to rescue me.

About being sorry.

I shook my head tiredly. 'Why break the habit of a lifetime?' I had meant to make a joke, relieve the tension a bit. I really was glad to see him. But the words came out more sharply than I intended. Jason took

them badly. He turned away. I tried to go after him but the Doctor chose that moment to hand me the cardboard box he'd been carrying. It was then that I saw there were medical supplies inside, resting on a bed of dusty gramophone records and saucy postcards, most of which seemed to date from before the Blitz.

By this time Chris had issued a set of force fields to the soldiers and had led them off after Tammuz. All except the one who was dead. I placed a force-field cuff on his wrist to prevent the sulphur dioxide combining, producing sulphuric acid in his body and rotting it away. As a gesture it wasn't much; it was all I could do.

I told Jason to take some force-field generators and check if Tammuz had left any NASA technicians alive in the main control area. He did as he was told, though there was a too-familiar sulky expression on his face.

I began to treat the injured villagers. I applied pressure cuffs to the three most serious injuries (none of which was life-threatening) and treated the remaining gas injuries (more serious) with organic alkaline. Treating the injuries didn't take very long. Reassuring the people and calming them down was the hard work. Panic's a killer. Especially when you're isolated in an alien environment that is doing its best to kill you, and half of your friends are on the ground with sulphuric acid burns or bullet wounds.

I remember the Doctor turning up at one point, grabbing the gramophone records out of the box and rushing back off to the TARDIS humming the words to 'Tobacco Road' under his breath. 'I don't know about you, Benny, but I simply can't work without music,' he called back over his shoulder. It was then I noticed that the TARDIS was looking decidedly worse for wear, with crusty yellow patches forming slowly on its blue wooden shell. The doors opened and the Doctor vanished inside, mumbling, ' "Bring dynamite and a crane. Blow it up, start all over again".' The doors slammed shut.

Only then did I think to wonder how the Doctor was able to walk around in all this sulphur dioxide without a force field of his own.

That was when Jason came back, favouring his injured arm and supporting a half-suffocated technician with his good one. He had fitted a force field to the technician but had been too late to prevent terminal sulphur dioxide poisoning. The man clutched Jason and convulsed suddenly. He died as I watched.

'Jason. You can let him go now.' Jason blinked.

'Jason, let him go, love. There's nothing you can do.'

I moved forward and took my husband in my arms. 'I am pleased to see you, you know.'

Jason did not relax. 'Benny. There's something I think you ought to know.'

'What's that?'

'There's a comm-unit back there. It's working. There's a message from the President on it.' Abruptly Jason began to laugh. 'Experimental rabbits!

Sure, right! Now we know what they really are!' His laughter stopped as abruptly as it began. 'They're not rabbits, they're nukes. NASA think we're terrorists, that we've taken over the Ark. They think we're responsible for what's happening on Earth. They're going to blow us up.'

I entered the area I'd previously seen only through slightly parted plastic screens, cautiously. Part of that was because I didn't quite know where Tammuz was yet and how many bullets were left in his gun; the rest was due to the haunting familiarity of the operations console, so much like the TARDIS. Slowly turning in the cylindrical holoprojection tank was a tiny, blue-green globe. Earth. It was covered for almost a third of its girth by yellow stains. Each new continent to come into view brought a glimpse of its own sites of infection.

While I was busy trying to absorb the scale of the infection, and the apocalyptic changes which must be going on there, Jason took my arm and dragged me over to a freestanding metal cabinet obviously placed there by the NASA staff. The unit comprised a holographic communicator and shelf system on which a number of artefacts, clearly of alien origin, had been placed. Some had been labelled with serial numbers and information sheets. They must be awaiting, shipment to Earth. Or to NASA's Tranquillity Base. Beside the comm-unit was a semi-circular table holding a portable chemical analyser, a number of computers, graph pads and light-pencils. Boxes containing equipment and supplies were piled around the table. The NASA staff must have been using this area as a sort of field HQ

while they investigated the rest of the base.

I was very pleased to see that Jason had fastened force field emitters to the wrists of the corpses piled up by the screens - the men and women Tammuz had shot before he'd opened this alien Pandora's Box and tipped the contents out all over the Earth.

Jason took my arm and dragged me over to the comm-unit. There was a middle-aged face in the tank, moving slowly as it repeated the same recorded message over and over again.

'- terrorists who have taken control of Tranquillity Base. If there are any NASA personnel alive please allow them to come to the communicator.

This is an urgent request. You must shut down the Museum control systems immediately. Whatever your aims you cannot achieve them if the Earth is

destroyed. You must see that. Think of your family and friends on Earth.

You may think you can control the systems. You cannot. Your family and friends will die along with every other living thing on the Earth if you do not heed this warning. If you have no regard for yourselves think of them. Here is a message from the President of the United States.'

The picture changed. I recognized the President immediately. That wasn't a surprise: I had half his albums. He stood there in the tank, like an Action Man doll, his little gestures and expressions almost comical compared with the booming voice emitted from the comm-unit. Someone really should have told him never to use a long shot on a home system like this; it was truly awful for dramatic representation.

The President said, 'I am calling from the White House. Although you have made no demands of the Peoples of the World we can only assume that you must have some. To wantonly eradicate an entire culture with all its history, art, scientific and social achievements can benefit no one. If this is your aim I beg you to reconsider. On behalf of the governments of the world I am willing to consider any form of negotiation. You have only to broadcast your, needs. We will hear them and respond?' He paused, glanced at someone off camera, then spoke again. 'Although Tranquillity, Base represents a milestone in xeno-archaeology and has been until now considered by major scientists as a key event in Mankind's emergence into the Universe, I

am unwilling and unable to allow the use of this device as an instrument of terror. If no message is received from you within one hour of this broadcast, the two three-hundred-megaton warheads currently on orbital intersect with your coordinates will be armed. You will be able to stop the explosion at any time short of detonation - scheduled for fourteen hundred hours EST - by shutting down the Museum and beginning negotiations. Once again I appeal to the humanity I know lies buried within every one of you. I hope and pray this ultimate measure of self-preservation will be unnecessary. I am sure that you would rather be remembered not as those who tried to destroy humanity, but as those who contributed significantly toward its growth and future scientific wealth and social stability. I am positive that, together, we can work this out.'

A satellite picture of two very large missiles with NASA emblems moving remorselessly above a sickly Earth replaced the President, while the voice of the NASA bod said, 'This message is a recording. If there are any NASA personnel alive on Tranquillity Base, please contact Houston control urgently on Channel Three. I repeat: this is NASA Control, Houston, addressing the terrorists who have -'

I compared the time on my watch with the time code on the recording. Shit.

The message had been broadcasting for several hours? The bombs were already armed. I did another calculation. We had about three hours until they blew us to kingdom come?

Jason turned to me. I could see he was on the ragged edge of panic, had been for some time. He wanted me to tell him what to do. I sighed impatiently, muttered, 'Mister President, your songs are fabulous, but I'm afraid your policies suck big time.' I expected Jason to smile at that. Boy was I wrong. His face sort of screwed up. I thought he was going to cry.

Then I thought he was going to yell at me. In the end he just stood there, shoulders slumped, like a kid who's had his favourite toy taken away for being naughty.

For some reason I found this extremely annoying? Then again, just lately, everything he did was extremely annoying. In any case, I had no time for it.

'I'm going to check on the villagers. Open up Channel Three and call me when you've got someone from NASA or the White House on the

line. I'm sure I don't need to tell you how important this is, so please don't screw it up.'

I turned away from him. I didn't want to see his face. I knew the expression that would come over it. He hated being told what to do. But he never seemed to show any damn initiative. Or any sensible initiative, anyway.

Even a little common sense would show me there was hope. Oh God, I was just so angry. So damn angry. Why the hell had I married the cretin anyway?

I turned back at a shout from Jason. 'I've got NASA.'

'Brilliant. Now go and tell the Doctor what's going on. He'll need to know.'

Jason stood there for a moment, apparently unable to believe I had simply dismissed him like that. I had more important things to think about. Like saving all of us. Like saving the Earth, for that matter.

'And tell him to bring his UNIT pass here. And any other formal ID he has.

We've got to convince these idiots we're on the level.'

I turned back to the comm-unit. This time the view through the tank was wider. I saw part of what was obviously the operations room framing a younger face than the one in the recording. The face was speaking to someone out of view: '- this for real? You told me there was a message coming in live from Tranquillity, are you -'

I said slowly, 'This is Bernice Summerfield. I am alive. I plan to stay that way. What can I tell you to get you to turn off those bombs?'

The woman in the tank continued fussing for a few seconds, then seemed to hear my words. Part of this. show was the one-second time delay radio waves took to reach Earth and return; part of it was an obvious attempt to exert authority. I kicked my heels impatiently. We didn't have time for this shit. Finally the woman looked up and acknowledged I was there. 'Ms Summerfield, you don't appear on our personnel manifest. I must therefore conclude you are one of the terrorists. Is this in fact true?'

I sighed. Everything was so damn black and white with these people. 'No.

Call me an innocent bystander. And it's Benny. I hate Ms.'

'Ms Summerfield, you're on the Moon. The nearest Greyhound station is two hundred and fifty thousand miles away. How can you be an "innocent bystander"?'

'Look, if it helps just think of me as Bruce Willis in Die Hard. I shouldn't be here but I am. The terrorists are dead but so are all your personnel. You have to talk me through the Base shutdown procedure. In the meantime please get these damn nukes out of my face!'

'We can't do that without authorization from the White House.'

'Well get it then!'

'You don't understand. We can't. We've got ground quakes here. The land lines are down. Even the red phone. Agent Yellow is on the move!'

'And whose fault is that?' I felt my temper slip. 'Whoever pushed the damn nuclear button in the first place, that's who!' I sighed. 'Who in their right minds elects a rock-star president of a major world government, anyway?'

By the time she had framed a response I was already adding, 'Never mind.

Look. You have affiliations with UNIT, don't you? Well, I have a member of UNIT here with me. If you can authenticate his ID will you then please disarm the nukes and talk me through the shutdown procedure?'

Instead of answering what I felt was a perfectly straightforward question, the woman asked a number of her own. 'Where is this man? Who is he?

How did he get there? Can you show me this ID?'

I turned. Where the hell was Jason? Where was the Doctor? 'Don't break the connection.' I ran for the screens. Jason was pushing through. 'Where's the Doctor?'

'Fixing the TARDIS. He can't come. He gave me these.' Jason showed me a passport wallet full of papers.

I grabbed them and ran back to the comm-unit, sorting them as I ran.

The woman on the screen - I didn't even know what her name was - was in the middle of asking me where I had gone. Without waiting for her to finish, I held up the papers to the lens. 'Look. The man I'm with is UNIT' scientific adviser. He's called the Doctor. You know him as John Smith. If you don't believe me get on the phone to Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart. He'll vouch for us.'

'We're trying. We're piggybacking a signal off EOSAT II, rerouting to the White House and Geneva. But it'll take a few minutes.'

I struggled to keep my voice calm. 'Look. We don't have time and you know it. You know what the stakes are. If you can't make this decision get me someone who can. Get me the guy in the recording for heaven's sake!'

The woman frowned. Licked her lips. 'He's dead. The infection has reached us. The base is on condition-one alert. We're quarantined?' She coughed. I realized she had been coughing intermittently all through the exchange, but I had been too preoccupied to notice. I also realized the movement behind her was not the orderly bustle of a well-run ops room, but the near panic of a bunch of people trying to keep it together as long as possible before the inevitable end.

'Look, I realize your problem, but -'

'No, you don't. People are down. Comm channels are going down. Christ, the antennas are melting right off the frames. Now, I'm in charge here. I have ultimate authority; ultimate responsibility. If I disarm those bombs now I may not be able to rearm them again. If you are a terrorist I will have been responsible for destroying the world!'

"For the last time, I'm not a terrorist! They're dead! Antennas don't "melt off their frames", and I'm not a bloody terrorist!'

She seemed about to reply, then was distracted by an excited shouting from behind her.

'The ID's checked out. She's on the level -'

'You mean the ID's on the level. She could still be a -'

'We're registering ground shocks! We're losing the antennas -

I felt like reaching out and grabbing the woman by the throat and shaking it.

Only the fact that I knew I'd be wasting my time stopped me. You can't throttle a laser beam. 'Listen to me! I need a decision! Now!'

The woman turned and issued orders, then turned back. 'We've authenticated your ID. I don't know how much time we have. We're preparing an info blip. Set your channel to -

Static.

'The bombs, you idiot, have you disarmed the bombs?'

Nothing. The transmission was over, the channel dead. Knowing my luck lately, so were we.

I stomped angrily over to the plastic screens - no mean feat in one-sixth gravity - and pulled them open. Where was Jason? I needed someone to shout at. He'd gone. Chris was there though, loping towards me. I waited.

One piece of good news. That was all I needed. Just one. Please.

No chance.

Chris bounced to a stop and said, 'Tammuz got away. He killed one of the soldiers, took his gun and his force field. Sorry, Benny. I'll keep looking.

We'll get him eventually?'

I shook my head. 'No. Let the soldiers do that. I've got something more important for you to do.'

'What's that?'

'Do you have your laptop with you? And that hacker software the Doctor gave you?'

'It's in the TARDIS. Why?'

I ushered him back into the control area, showed him the picture of the two missiles en route to the Moon with their . nuclear payloads. 'Chris, meet the Flopsey Twins. Benjy Bunny and Billy Bunny. Say hello to Mister Myxomatosis. Chris. I want you to access the control systems and kill these wretched things before they kill us, OK?'

Chris shrugged agreeably. 'Whatever you say, Roz. I'll need to get out on to the surface to establish a direct line of sight but that won't be a

problem.

I'll get my laptop and the Doctor's umbrella.'

It took me a moment to realize what Chris had said: 'Roz?'

Chris shook his head. 'Did I call you "Roz"? That was silly. Sorry, Benny.'

'Disarm those bombs and you can call me Cleopatra Queen of the Nile. I'll even cuddle a snake if you ask nicely.' Chris grinned, ran off in long strides to fetch his laptop.

Left to my own devices I decided a short breather was in order. I sat down in one of the NASA chairs and put my feet up on the table which held the various alien artefacts. They were a mixed bunch. There were pieces of stone, some obviously acid-etched, mingled with chunks of etched crystal that might have been bits of circuitry or machinery. I looked at these and thought of blasting charges, intrusive archaeology. Why couldn't people be more patient? They'd obviously blown something up when they'd first got here. By accident? I had to assume so. I sighed.

Glass boxes held things that might have been tiny, crystalline sea sponges.

The sponges floated in a brown liquid. The boxes were labelled with acid warning signs. I looked closer at the specimens. As a kid I'd kept a chemical garden. Metallic salts and crystals sown in a fish tank full of waterglass. But these formations were not like those. They had. been very beautiful but still, unmoving, rigid. These forms moved. As if they were breathing.

I sat up straight. The formations were alive.

Alien life? In an installation six billion years old? Had they been cloned?

Grown by the NASA people?- Were they intended to be here? Were they part of the operating system? Could we use them to fix what had happened to Earth?

A sound behind me made me jump. A scuffling sound and a throaty bleating noise. I turned. The sheep. It was the damn sheep. It pushed its way into the control area and moved towards me, bouncing comically in the unfamiliar gravity, one leg stiffened by the addition

of a force-field emitter. It was making unhappy-sheep noises. I wondered if it knew it was on an alien world. The first sheep in space. I giggled. Then I suddenly thought of Bill Raelsen, Terry Sehna, Ellie Noble. They would be here somewhere; their bodies would. If what Liz had told me before she died was right. I resolved to go and find them when I had time. Try to give them some kind of decent burial.

The sheep pushed back out through the screens and wandered off.

I looked back at the alien life forms in the specimen boxes. What if they hadn't been grown? Where had they come from? Another chamber?

Another part of the base? I unsealed one box, reached inside. The sulphuric acid sloshed around my force-field-protected hand, harmless as washing-up water. I touched the spongelike formation. I don't know what I expected. A revelation maybe. Communication. Something.

There was nothing. Just the faint, grainy texture of the crystalline surface.

I withdrew my hand, let the excess acid rain back into the box. I was about to seal the box when someone touched me. I jumped, dropped the box.

Acid splashed over the table, dripped on to the floor, where it puddled harmlessly? The sponge fell to the ground and rolled away. I expected it to shatter. It didn't.

Jason picked it up and held it out to me. 'Sorry.' I reached out to take it from him. He wasn't moving His face was blank, frighteningly so. I remembered a time in South Africa when he had pulled a knife on a villager who was asking us for medical help. He thought the woman was a first-stage Ebola victim. When he found out he was wrong he put the knife away and apologized. Not that that would have helped if he had been three seconds quicker. It was a little reminder of his darker side that I could have done without.

'Jason, put the sponge back in the box.'

Jason blinked. 'I ... er ... sure. Here. Here, give me the box, then, and I'll . .

.' He tailed off.

'Jason? What is it?'

His voice was as disbelieving as his expression. 'It's this thing.' He waved the sponge. 'It's alive. It recognizes me?'

I laughed. 'Don't be stupid. Put it back in the box and we'll - I stopped then.

Another voice was speaking? The Ark.

'Attention. This is the personality matrix of the Astronomer Royal. Attention Jason Kane. This is a courtesy message. Welcome to the Genesis of Cthalctose. We thank you for your friendship and invite you to visit the planet below. When the terraforming is complete and life has begun again, come to us. Teach us what you know. Help us grow and learn. Shape our new world as you shaped the old. Welcome, Jason Kane. Welcome to our Genesis?'

I was still gaping a moment later when the machine hanging overhead unfolded like an origami trick and what looked like most of a solar system emerged?

I ducked to avoid a G-class sun?

'Jason Kane, what the hell have you been doing?' My voice was a squeaky mixture of surprise and irritation. A number of planets spread out around me. I aimed an irritable kick at a barren ball of rock some three thousand miles in diameter. The planet passed right through my foot, ignored me completely to assume a tide-locked orbit around the sun.

I could see Jason was trying to catch his breath. 'I ... I don't know, Benny, honestly. I don't understand! It's nothing to do with me!'

'Oh great.' I folded my arms, allowed a shower of comets to pass through me and coalesce into a second planet. 'Men. It's all the same to you, isn't it? The conception of a child, the genesis of an alien species. It's the same old excuse we hear, every time. "It's not my fault. It's nothing to do with me." '

Jason recoiled from the bitterness in my voice. Good. Let him realize what he sounded like to me sometimes. 'Benny, what are you talking about?' A shocked expression dawned across his face in the ghostly light from the second planet as it formed between us. 'Are you -?'

The second planet moved slowly on its orbit, deepening in colour until it was a yellow-ochre globe streaming with sulphur compounds and acid rain.

A voiceover in my head T recognized as the Astronomer Royal droned on about billions of years, about sulphuric acid phenols, about the genus and genius of life. I tried to ignore it. I had more important things to argue about.

'And would it matter to you if I was?'

He tried to move closer. A planetary moon got in the way.

Jason stopped, let it orbit past, a grey mess of craters, a young world nonetheless. 'Benny. That's hardly fair, is it?'

'Neither is running off with a bit of French totty!'

'Well what do you want me to do? You've been behaving like a damn kid for weeks!'

'What do I want you to do?' We skimmed the surface of the moon, grey, lifeless, half familiar, then headed out on an elliptical trajectory for the second planet. 'Oh, hey. What do I want you to do? How about showing a little responsibility? You can't spend the rest of your life running away from Daddy. I should know?'

By now we were descending, falling down from orbit into the atmosphere of the second planet, rushing through clouds of sulphurous yellow and brown, dropping out of the atmosphere to skim a chain of terrifying volcanoes before plunging into a sea of boiling acid.

'I'm not running away! I'm trying to heal!'

And there was life all around us, the oceans were full of it, crystalline life, beautiful, like starfishes, like anemones, huge, hundreds of metres wide, and intelligent. Cthalctose. According to the Astronomer Royal's voiceover they had art, science. They had plays, fiction, mathematics, astronomy, astrology. They had children and hope and beauty and fear and predators and politics and -

'That's all I hear from you! "I'm trying, Benny. I'm trying." Well you're not wrong there are you? You tried to get off with a girl in Paris. You tried to tell me you didn't know why I was mad. You tried to apologize. You tried not to let me see you fancied Sam Denton more than me! You tried to rescue me!

You tried that one at least twice! You're always trying to do things, Jason.

You spend so much of your damn life trying that you never do anything!'

And now we were ascending, moving out of the oceans, shooting across the mouths of the volcanoes, through stinking smoke and lava, through burning clouds and up into the cool dark of orbit.

'Come on Benny, you know that's not fair. Everyone's different. Some people are survivor types, some aren't.' We were past the lunar orbit by now; the outer Solar System unfolded around us with dizzying speed.

'Remember the Hindenburg? Some people stand in the aisles and try to get their luggage, some people climb over the seats to get out. Just because someone does the wrong thing doesn't make them less of a person for it.'

'No,' I screamed, ducking to avoid an asteroid belt. 'No, it just makes them dead!' A gas giant whirled past, a brown dwarf, eight or nine times the mass of Jupiter, shepherd moon to a gigantic ring of stellar dust encircling the Solar System's sun.

'Every time, Jason! Every time something like this happens you freeze. You just stand there waiting for instructions, waiting for someone to tell you what to do.'

Another gas giant loomed before us, then another, slightly smaller planet, then we were accelerating outwards again, shooting away from. the sun towards the Oort cloud. And something else. Something moving.

Intractable. Unstoppable. The Other.

'Well now I'm telling you. Think it through. Weigh the facts. Make a decision on your own for once, and for once in your damn life be responsible for the results of your actions!' ,

The Solar System began to distort. The outermost gas giant fell into the Other and vanished in a burst of X-rays. The Other was a singularity. A black hole. I knew that without the helpful voiceover from the Astronomer Royal. What I found out that I didn't know was that this particular singularity was on a course that would take it through the heart of this Solar System, destroying it utterly, a cosmic accident about which the Cthalctose could do nothing.

'Or just stand there and wait meekly for your luggage and bum with

the rest of the victims.' Despair and bitterness mixed in my voice. I waited for a reply from Jason. There was none. The rest of the Solar System fell remorselessly into the black hole. Gas giants. Dust. Asteroids. The works.

It was heading towards the sun and the inner planets when something happened. Something I couldn't see. Something was wrong with the singularity. It was glowing, like a sun, a brilliant sun, except that singularities didn't do that, couldn't do that, and I realized I was seeing a flash of radiation, of X-rays, hard radiation, heat, light, something that was impossible. Enough to irradiate a planet, to kill all life. Enough to melt a lunar hemisphere, send a now-familiar Moon hurling out of the Solar System?

Impossible.

Yet I was watching it happen.

Terrified by this ancient calamity I could barely understand let alone experience, I reached out to Jason for support. Our hands met, the force fields opened to let us touch. His skin was hot, flushed. Was he angry?

Upset? Scared? Did he understand what we were seeing here? The Genesis of the Ark? The destruction of an entire planetary culture?

I felt his hands enclose mine. I reached out for him, but he wouldn't hold me. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of that.' He didn't answer, just pulled away slowly.

Small enough to fit between us now, the Solar System began its last inevitable collapse. The inner planets vanished in bursts of radiation. More stellar material vanished into the all-consuming maw. The sun began to unravel?

'Jason? We have to talk. Hold me. Please.'

Jason did not respond. The singularity impacted the stellar surface, sank beneath and began to orbit. Moments later the sun was a dark ribbon of flame, then gone entirely. Nothing was left of the Solar System except a dark hole in the Universe and a tiny, wandering Moon.

The machine refolded itself. The lights came back on.

I looked around for Jason. He wasn't there. I looked in the obvious

places.

Behind the cabinets, under the table. I found the broken specimen box, the crystallized sponge and a chicken. But no Jason. I knuckled my eyes tiredly

- and that was when I realized something else was missing. My ring.

The time ring.

I had a sudden terrible premonition of what my husband was going to do. I yelled after him but I knew it was too late. Six billion years too late.

I kicked the chicken.

It didn't bring him back.

***

Chapter 10

When I was little there was one thing I believed in. One thing in all the pain and hurt that would take me away from my life, my dad, all of it. I kept this one thing folded in half and stuffed in the pocket of my jeans. I cried myself to sleep most nights clutching it; I bunked off school most days to read it, over and over again. It was the only thin I had when I left Earth.

The Magician's Nephew, by C. S. Lewis. The paperback. The one with all those cute drawings.

I lost it on Denaria VII, victim of a mugging down some back alley, lost it with my cash, my ID and my shoes. I suppose I was lucky not to lose my life. By then I didn't need the book. I could almost recite my favourite passages from memory. I identified wholly with Digory, cried when he cried, longed for a girlfriend as tough and sensible as Polly, thought I'd found her when I met Bernice.

That was years later, of course, and Bernice brought a mad uncle of her own to our relationship.

I'd forgotten that old book by then. But now two images in particular came rushing back. First were the rings Digory's Uncle Andrew had given him and Polly. They could take you places. Other worlds. Yellow for the outward journey. Green for the return. The second was the Wood Between the Worlds. A place where every pool was a doorway to another world.

That was where I was now.

I remembered the Doctor giving us the rings when we were married. 'Be nice to them and they'll be nice to you,' he'd told us privately after the ceremony. 'You can ask them things. They'll work for you. They'll take you places. But they only do that together. And only if you ask nicely.'

I looked around. I was in a ... well I was surrounded by ... well, the suns I could see were not really suns, no, they were ... well they were more like windows ... or doorways, stretched out of shape by relativity ... doorways of light that were really embryos, the first seconds and minutes of other times and places, the moments of conception of worlds and times and peoples and galaxies? The birthplace of the Universe. Of all the universes. The Wood Between the Worlds.

I felt cool, calm, very much in control. The sounds I could hear were not quite equations and not quite the tiny voices of growing things being born. I saw the moment of change between what was not and what was.

I should have been, insane. I wasn't. I should have been dead. I wasn't?

I wasn't hungry. I wasn't. thirsty. I wasn't breathing. I

- fell out of a burning sky into a lake of boiling sulphuric acid, one ring clutched in each hand, mine and the one I had (stolen) borrowed from Benny, and I felt a bit like my first acid trip, a bit like the first time I made love with someone I really loved, a bit like a little kid who has just got off a rollercoaster, eyes bright, mind spinning like the world had spun around him only moments before, yelling, 'Again, Mum, oh wow, I want to do it again!'

I was still yelling in schoolboy delight when something that looked like a cross between a shark, a squid and a space cruiser churned out of the brown ocean depths, grabbed me and swallowed me whole.

Being alone in the dark, surrounded by a sloshing ocean of digestive juices, gave me plenty of time to think about what I was going to do when I got out.

Escape was never in any doubt; it was just a matter of waiting. I was protected by a force field. I was going to come out one way or another, eventually. In the meantime, I had several hours in which to consider what I had done, and why.

After the damn message from the Astronomer Royal everyone was going to think I had something to do with the horrible mess I had just left behind.

That simply wasn't true. I didn't know why the Ark had picked on me to give a gold-plated invitation to but it should have been obvious to a blind beggar that the Ark had made a cock-up. Not as monumental a cock-up as dumping a couple of million tons of contagious terraforming virus on to the Earth but still, a fairly large cock-up, nonetheless.

It was clear, to me at least, that somebody had to do something about the situation. The Doctor couldn't, or wouldn't, probably. Bernice was in the most foul and unpredictable mood I had ever experienced and Chris was wandering around like a lovestruck teenager with his head

in the clouds and his heart stuck on a dead woman. That left me. Benny was right.

Someone had to take action.

I thought about the recording, hologram, telepathic museum pieces, whatever it was we had experienced before I set off. It seemed clear what had happened, all those billions of years ago ... er, now, I mean. Intelligent life on this, the second planet of the Solar System, had been ... would be wiped out by the near passage of a black hole. The Cthalctose had somehow managed to build a terraforming platform inside their moon, launching it into space before the end, in the hope that it would be able to seed Cthalctose life somewhere else in the Universe. Unfortunately for us somewhere else just happened to be the Earth.

Somehow I had to stop that. I had to persuade them that their efforts would not work, perhaps try to get them to target some other world than Earth. A barren one, where there was no life. I didn't know if I would succeed, but I had to try. I had to show Benny that she was wrong about me. I wasn't a failure. I wasn't someone who froze in a crisis. God knows, I had to move fast enough on occasions in the past, didn't I? Some of those occasions had even saved her life.

The more I thought about our last (screaming row) discussion the more angry I got. There were days when Benny could be annoying, sure, but everyone had days like that. It was only reasonable to suppose that things wouldn't be roses and meals out and good movies between us every single day of our lives. But this! This behaviour was bordering on the psychotic. It worried me and frightened me and it was selfish of her. It made me angry.

It was like she was going mad or something and I was the focus of her madness.

I tried to control the anger I felt. It was stupid. I needed a clear head to deal with this situation. To prove to her she was wrong, that I could solve problems and help out in crises.

To prove to her that I could stop this mess before it even started.

There you go, Benny, I would say. There's the Earth, clean and neat again, just like it was two weeks ago. Clever huh? Call it an 'un-birthday present'.

The quote would swing it. She loved Caroll. But she would also have

to see that I had succeeded where she and the Doctor had not even tried.

So I had taken her ring, put them together and asked them nicely to bring me back to here? To Cthalctose, the planet the Astronomer Royal had been talking about, six billion years ago.

Something bumped against me. My eyes were slowly adjusting to the darkness - it wasn't quite complete - and, in the dim light-of what I supposed was some kind of gut flora, I noticed I was surrounded by partially digested crystalline bones. There weren't many and what few there were broke up as I watched, melting away into the slurry of brown liquid surrounding me.

I felt something then. Something in my head. A voice. No - a feeling. No - a response to a feeling, my feeling, my anger.

The gut flora pulsed brightly around me, waves of colour and shape. At the same time feelings entered my head. Soothing feelings. Not words.

Emotions. A sense of calmness. Don't be frightened. I am curious. I cannot digest you. Are you alien?

Great. I had been wondering how to contact the Cthalctose. Apparently I had been swallowed by one.

No? You were swallowed by a Vehicle. I am a Provider. I bring food and information and messages to the Landlocked Ones. I will take you to them if you wish. The Astronomer Royal will be very interested to know what you can tell him of the Other.

Once again the sensation in my head wasn't one of words so much as feelings. Don't be scared. We're going for a ride. It'll be nice. We can tell each other stories. Swap stuff. The gut flora glimmered in time with the feelings pulsing through my head. Suddenly I smiled, then laughed. Benny would have got the joke too. The thing that had swallowed me wasn't a life form so much as a tool. A means of transport. I was in communication with an intelligent stomach.

The Vehicle released me (I'm going to use that word, released - anything else would just be too disgusting to think about) on to a rocky shelf at a depth of about five fathoms. About a kilometre away I could see a churning glow in the ocean. The Provider told me in soothing feelings it was a nursery, currently occupied by several children. That is, I saw the image of a nursery, a warm safe place

where no predators gathered to hunt the anemone-like crystalline Cthalctose young, but the word I gave the picture was not nursery: it was volcano. I realized quickly this was in fact one of the smaller volcanoes in the chain I had seen girdling the planet's equator, in the Astronomer Royal's guided tour of his own solar system, before I had left the Moon.

Realizing this I also appreciated how unlucky the Cthalctose had been, in cosmic terms. By rights, any species whose young are born inside an underwater volcano should've had no difficulty whatsoever dealing with almost any of life's other little problems. Of course, most species didn't have the bad luck to have a black hole orbiting within their solar system.

I stood on the shelf as the Provider Vehicle swam off into the ocean. What was going to happen now? Where was the Astronomer Royal? What was I going to say to him when he did choose to show up?

At that moment the rocky shelf I was on moved. It wasn't a shelf. It was a tentacle. A thick, crystalline, rock-coloured tentacle. It moved and I fell over, a slow-motion swan-dive in the acid ocean. I landed on the tentacle and began to roll. I grabbed helplessly for a handhold, wrapped both arms around a barnacle-like encrustation. No - around a barnaclelike animal as large as a tractor tyre. I clung tightly to the projection as the tentacle accelerated through the water. At first I thought the owner of the tentacle was shooting along like a squid with its tentacles - and me - in tow. Then I realized I was moving sideways. No, not quite sideways. In an arc. I peered into the murk. Judging by the sweep of the arc, the tentacle must be as long as several train carriages. And now the tentacle began to curl, the surface crumpling, tiny crystalline folds and wrinkles appearing in what I now took to be skin. We slowed abruptly. I rocked forward, my grip breaking, and somersaulted over the tentacle. Then I was falling slowly through a murky rain of particulate matter. The rain ceased abruptly as I fell through a strong current.

Then I saw him. The Astronomer Royal. He was beautiful. A six-hundred-metre-wide anemone made of translucent crystal through which bioluminescence blazed in incredibly intricate patterns. He filled the relatively clear space in the ocean bed into which I was falling. Tea-coloured acid swirled around and through him. He was inhaling the particulate matter I had just fallen clear of through a number of mouths.

There were about twenty mouths and each was more than fifteen feet

in diameter. They were ringed with crystalline muscle and lined with strainers like a whale's baleen. They were orange, yellow, purple, green . . . actually they were changing colour like an octopus, almost too fast for me to follow.

Weeds were caught in them and waved softly. I wondered what sort of weed could survive immersion in a sulphuric acid sea, then giggled madly when I realized I should really be wondering what kind of life form could survive in a sulphuric acid sea. In the end I simply decided not to worry about it.

After falling for another five minutes or so I touched down on the gently pulsing surface of the Astronomer Royal's body. 'Er ... hi,' I said. 'I'm Jason.'

The tentacles continued to curl, producing conflicting currents in the ocean.

And now I became aware that there were other forms lurking in the acidic depths. Hundreds of them. Some large, some small, some shaped like anemones, some like whales with squid growing out of their bellies. One looked like a gently spinning fairground carousel made of sixty-foot-long.

sea horses trailing glowing tentacles. There were a great many of the sharklike Vehicles. I felt the confused emotional montage of many Providers.

And another. The Astronomer Royal.

'Ah,' he said inside my head. 'The alien. Would you like to be a guest star in my current performance?'

I sighed impatiently. 'Listen to me. I haven't got time to mess about.'

I felt the Astronomer Royal inside my head. 'Ah. No. I see. You are not very old. Nor are you likely to live past the dramatic climax of Act Two.'

The dramatic climax of - 'How long is this performance of yours?'

'The overture was five years. The first act four decades. Act Two is expected to run for another seven decades. Act Three another six decades after that. Then there is the epilogue. The artistic appreciation, the wrap party . . . I would say a further six decades. At the least.'

A hundred and ninety years. Nearly two centuries. I almost laughed. Talk about fiddling while Rome burnt. Now there was a joke Benny would have appreciated.

'Joke? You think my performance a joke?' The Astronomer Royal seemed to rumble, a bit like an earthquake, or the nearby volcano.

'No, I'm sure -'

'It is a performance in the highest sense. A quintessential juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy, of emotion and action. Of information and suggestion, threat and remedy. And you mock it?'

I sat down, the better to weather the Royal temper tantrum. 'No. It's like this. I'm not here to judge or criticize, write reviews or even spread theatre gossip. I'm here to ask you a favour.' I took a deep breath and plunged on, before the Astronomer Royal could protest. 'I come from a planet many ... a very long way away. And this planet I come from is in danger. It is dying.'

The Astronomer Royal opened and closed a few of its mouths interestedly.

Something the size of a killer whale barely escaped being squashed in one.

'A dying world? A race against time? I understand! You have a performance of your own. You have come here to observe, at least observe for as long as you are able within your own small lifetime. Observe and make notes and take pointers from my own performance. You are a fan!

My first alien fan! I am surprised and gratified!'

No, no no no no! 'Look. I'm not a fan.' 'Not a fan?'

'No!' My voice was a shout of frustration. With an effort I got my temper under control. He was an alien after all: he probably didn't even realize how badly he was annoying me, how obtuse he was being or how easily he was missing the point. 'That is, what I mean is, I have something far more important to discuss. You see, I know the future. I know what you are going to do on your world's moon -

'You know the climax of my performance?' The Astronomer Royal's voice was a mixture of petulance and anger. 'You aren't a fan and you know the climax of my performance?'

'Yes, that's right, and I'm here to ask you not to do what you're going to do!

Not to seed the Moon with life, not to launch it into space. If you do that, it'll mean the end for my world.'

The Astronomer Royal suddenly heaved. If I had thought the previous motion was dangerous I soon learnt my mistake. The sea bed for a mile in either direction heaved. Cthalctose spun, and bashed into one another with huge force and were whirled away in the terrible currents. Nearby rocks toppled lazily to the ocean floor with the sound of slow summer thunder.

'You know the climax of my performance? You aren't a fan and you know the climax of my performance, and you want me to alter the ending?'

Tentacles had reached out to grab me, otherwise I would surely have been whirled away with the rest of the audience. The tentacles closed over me with crushing force. 'I see it all now. Yes. Oh yes. You come here, emissary from another world, come in peace, so you say? But we know now why you come! Oh yes, we do. You come not to study at the cilia' of a master but to steal his secrets, to disclose the climax of his own performance and ruin a hundred years of planning and rehearsals! And for what? So your own, miserable existence can be enriched by the tiniest fragment of my own genius! You have come here to steal my thunder and I won't have it!' The tentacle uncurled. I found myself hurtling towards a number of Vehicles.

One of them opened its maw to swallow me whole. 'Vehicles! Providers!

Take this alien pestilence to the nursery and give him to the Royal Polyps!'

I thought fast. This was no good. I'd already been swallowed and half digested once. I didn't want to be so again. Especially not as a precursor to having something even more horrible done to me in the heart of an underwater volcano. A Vehicle swam closer, acid churning in its wake. I tried to imagine what Benny would do.

'Wait!' I shouted. 'What if I can suggest a better way of ending the performance?' The Vehicle stopped.

The Royal seaquake stopped.

The Astronomer Royal's mouths opened and closed interestedly.

'How?'

Good. Yes. Excellent. How was I going to make good on that suggestion?

Once again I had seen Benny proved right. I never thought about anything before I did it. I just dug big holes for myself. 'Um,' I said. 'You could ... well, perhaps it would be worth considering ... that is to say what about changing the ending so you don't . . .' Oh yes, very good, Jason. But how?

I couldn't think.

The Astronomer Royal eventually gave up waiting for an answer. For a being whose normal life span was in excess of half a millennium he seemed unfairly impatient.

'As I thought. Everyone's a critic. No one has the artistic genius to back up their crass and obviously derived suggestions. Vehicles! Providers! Give him to the children.'

'Wait!' A moment of inspiration struck me. 'Please wait!' I pulled the last half a dozen of the Doctor's force-field emitters off my wrist, those I should have given to any of the NASA technicians who were still alive. 'Let me ask you a question. How do you suppose I've survived in your ocean so far? I've been swallowed and digested and puked up and crushed by large tentacles. I'm still alive because of one of these things.'

'These things?' There was doubt in the Astronomer Royal's voice. But curiosity as well. 'They are so small. I can hardly see them.'

'They are called force-field emitters. I don't know how they work, exactly, but I do know they can be used to harness energy and control it. Do you have nuclear fusion? Fission? Ion drives?'

'We understand these things you speak of. The Royal Polyps play with them from time to time. But you know what children are like They tire quickly.'

'Well, with these things here you can make your Polyps' toys into spaceships bigger than you ever dreamt of. You will have the power of your sun at your finger - tentacletips. You will be able to get everyone off the planet before it is destroyed. You'll be able to live. You'll all be

able to live!'

'Live?' The Astronomer Royal mouthed the word as if it were a novelty.

Perhaps it was. I didn't know how long he'd been living with the notion that his generation would be the last. That he himself would probably witness the extinction of his species.

'Yes. Live. You know, somewhere else. Another planet? There are loads around.'

'I know! I am the Astronomer Royal?'

'Yes of course. I'd forgotten that in the ... uh ... immensity of your performance?' Ah Benny. If you could only see me now. It's not so hard.

By now the audience was drifting back. The Astronomer Royal considered.

He looked at the various members of the audience. He thought about it some more. A small tentacle - no bigger than an elephant's trunk - plucked the force-field emitters from me, held them and examined them with intricate thoroughness.

'Hexagonal crystalline structure? We understand this. Polarized lines of force. We understand this. Quantum particle emission using normal space and time as a conduit for a cohesive tripolar field. Ah. This we do not understand. But we can learn. Perhaps you are right. Perhaps we can live.

We will have our best Engineers work on the problem at a molecular level.'

Things like sea urchins swam out of the Astronomer Royal's mouth. They had long, fine spines with which they propelled themselves through the acid sea. They swam up to the force-field emitters and lifted them from the tentacle. Some held them, some examined them with their spines.

Meanwhile the Astronomer Royal seemed to reach a decision. 'Until we know all that can be known about these objects you will remain our guest.

Since the estimated time for understanding these objects and

recreating them is many times your own lifetime, we will now have you placed in suspended animation. Your presence will also act as insurance against something going wrong, or others of your kind coming to change the climax of our new performance.' What? 'No, wait, I've -

The Astronomer Royal ejected more Engineers. Now I was worried. If they could examine things at a molecular level did that mean they could get inside my force field? I , scrabbled for Benny's ring. Time to kiss this place goodbye. The engineers attached themselves to me. Their spines rubbed against the force field, a couple of millimetres from my face. Despite my safety I began to feel claustrophobic. And which pocket had I put the ring in? Left or right? Was it under that hankie? Beside the wallet?

Something tickled my face.

The urchin spines were inside the force field. They were touching me, exploring me, learning about me. I felt a tickling sensation in my ear, all over my skin. Were they inside my body now? I tried to shout. There didn't seem much point. I didn't feel any pain. I didn't feel any fear.

I didn't feel anything at all in fact. For more than a thousand years.

I dreamt. Of course they weren't dreams: they were performances. Other people's experiences, an emotional flood of them, accelerated almost to nonsense by the slowing of my own metabolism. I saw images from the greatest and the weakest of the Cthalctose minds. I saw them build and fight and destroy and build again. I saw them learn about the force fields; I saw them think about the applications of the technology they now owned; I saw them build schools and hospitals and extend life and banish poverty. I saw them build great cities in the ocean, free themselves from the confines of the rocks to which they would normally be fixed for their whole adult life.

I saw them evolve from a race of thinkers to a race of builders. They took abstract philosophy, art and history and fused them with the new science to form a powerful whole.

I saw them tame the great central continent and aquaform it into a beautiful city a thousand miles wide. I saw them take control of the weather, of the land, of near-orbital space. I even saw them begin to push back the great volcanoes girdling their world to make more living space for themselves.

But something was wrong.

They were improving the quality of their life, the length of their life ... but no one yet had made provision to use the new science to save their species from extinction. The Astronomer Royal was still plotting out his new performance, as yet only planning rehearsals. It was as if they were deliberately ignoring the threat moving remorselessly through the Solar System. As if ignoring the problem would make it go away. They were wrong. I knew that the moment I spotted it, five hundred years into my incarceration. I knew it because that's what I had done, so many years ago.

Now I saw that, though he was still the oldest among them, the relative gap between the Astronomer Royal's experience and the general population was narrowing. Now more of the Cthalctose were living for longer. More were growing and maturing; learning about themselves and about their society. More were taking an interest in their future, in shaping their future.

The balance of power was shifting. The old way - of considering - was dying and the new way - of doing - was coming into its own.

At that moment my dreams turned to nightmares. Nightmares that lasted half a millennium.

I watched them build cities and blow them up and build them again. I watched them waste years improving their old spaceships before realizing they should start again from new principles. I watched them realize, far too late, that they had no time to build enough new ships to escape their destruction.

I saw them propose and reject plan after desperate plan. I watched as they built force-field generators the size of asteroids and orbited them around the singularity to prevent it absorbing any more mass from the Solar System.

It was acting without thinking. Even the new science couldn't neutralize the force of gravity. In less than three hundred years half the Solar System had gone, replaced by a shell of solar matter the size of a brown dwarf which had formed with its inner surface just metres away from the Event Horizon.

Worse: buried deep beyond the reach of solar energy, the force-field generator power supplies would not last forever. In a few years the force field would collapse and half a solar system's worth of matter would drop, almost simultaneously, over the Event Horizon.

I had seen the results of that already.

A momentary sun. An irradiated planet. An extinct species - and a moon blasted out into space carrying the seeds of life to destroy my own world.

In the last years the Cthalctose came to understand what I already knew. In desperation they united to expend their last resources and energy attempting to build a fleet of ships which could carry them to another world and save their lives. But it was too little, too late. In the end all they had time to do was return to the Astronomer Royal's original plan of building a terraforming platform on the Moon and argue about whose fault it was that they had failed to survive for the few remaining years before the end came.

I could have spared them even that waste of time.

I knew what was going to happen; I knew whose fault it was.

I had only ever meant to stop any of this from happening in the first place.

Now I saw the truth. Instead of saving two species from extinction I had been responsible for the destruction of both.

I watched it all happen, safe inside my force field. I watched the star bloom, I watched the Moon shift out of orbit on the start of its long journey, I watched them die. Vehicles, Providers, Engineers, even the old Astronomer Royal. I watched them settle into death and dissolve in the acid oceans, and finally, as the planet began to break up with tidal stresses, and the stasis-inducing chemicals leached out of my body, I slept.

I was shaken awake by an earthquake. The nurseries were blooming with fire, lava and acid met in a symphony of flame. The world was shaking itself apart. There was no one else alive, anywhere. The dreams were over.

Gone.

I had a sudden image in my head. An alleyway, black and cold under a starless sky, empty except for a paperback book - The Magician's Nephew

- its pages rustling quietly in a dying wind, a whisper of sound that seemed to say, No more stories, Jason. Story time is over now.

I slipped Benny's ring on to my finger next to my own, and asked them both nicely if they would please take me home.

***

Chapter 11

When I realized Jason had taken my ring, I sat down on the floor and tried to think. What was he going to do? It didn't take a genius to work that one out. We had both experienced the Astronomer Royal's SurroundSound SuperMarionation History of the Cthalctose Species. Now Jason had both rings. I'd bet my life savings to an ice lolly he was trying to change things. I didn't bother waiting around for the changes I knew were not going to come. I spared a few minutes hoping he wouldn't get himself killed learning this particular lesson, then went to help the soldiers try to find Tammuz.

We searched for an hour. Nothing. I went back to the TARDIS. It was looking particularly unwell. Inside, things were even worse. The Doctor, now wearing one of his own force-field emitters was head and shoulders deep in a panel beneath the Time Rotor. All I could see were his little legs sticking out from beneath the console. I am sure he didn't hear me come in, but he waggled his left foot in my general direction anyway.

'Ah. Benny. Soldering iron.'

'Pardon?'

The foot waggled in the general direction of a mechanic's toolkit, the metal compartments spread open like an inverted pyramid. 'Soldering iron. Flux.

Solder. Thank you so much.'

I rummaged in the kit and handed the items to the disembodied hand which stuck out briefly from under the console. 'You've come to tell me Jason's gone.'

'How did you know?'

'Ah. Telepathic connection between the rings and the TARDIS. Hand me a five-and-three-tenths spanner would you?'

I passed him the spanner. 'Spanner? Soldering iron? This is all a little crude, isn't it?'

'Some situations call for subtle finesse, some - there was a loud banging noise '- for the bludgeon. There. That's got it. Is there a small screwdriver in there? No. No, sorry. Make that a spokeshave.'

'A spokeshave? What are you doing under there, building a cupboard?' He made a sort of non-committal grunting noise. 'Are you sure you wouldn't just like the whole kit?'

'Actually that's not such a bad idea. What are you going to do about Jason?'

I pushed the kit over to him. 'Not much I can do, is there?' He hooked the handle with his foot and the kit vanished beneath the console.

'Depends what you mean by "not much".'

'I don't understand.'

'There are always choices.' There was another loud thump, a muffled yelp and the Doctor slid out from beneath the console, sucking his thumb. He sprang to his feet and dusted himself down, pulling an apparently endless succession of tools from his pockets and jamming them back into the toolkit.

'What if there aren't any choices?'

'Invent some. That's what Jason has done.'

I tried to curb my anger at my husband's stupidity. 'That's what he thinks he's done?'

'No. That's what he has done. Everyone in the Universe has free will, Benny. Predestination wouldn't work otherwise.'

'Er. Sorry?'

'Look at it this way. You and I both know that Jason has gone back in time to try to stop what's already happened from happening, right?'

'Right.'

'But we both know he's going to fail, right?'

'Right.'

'And that in failing he will be responsible for the entire situation he tried to prevent.'

'Right.'

'But he doesn't know that, does he?' 'No.'

'No. Or he wouldn't have bothered to try to stop it in the first place, would he?'

'Er, no. I suppose not.'

'Of course he wouldn't. There wouldn't have been any point, would there?

But if he hadn't gone then what actually happened wouldn't have happened at all, and you'd probably still be drinking warm Pepsis in Dogubayazit instead of having this conversation.'

'But that would be a paradox.'

'Exactly.'

'But paradoxes are impossible.'

'I prefer to use the word embarrassing.' He winked conspiratorially. 'They're less threatening that way?'

'Am I supposed to laugh at that?' 'Do you want to?'

'Would it make a difference?'

'Probably not.'

I chuckled. 'So what's your point?'

'Only this: that by exercising his free will, Jason has in fact become an agent of predestination.'

'And that's what you wanted to tell me? That my husband is probably responsible for the destruction of the Earth and the deaths of countless millions, and that I should try to understand and forgive him?'

The Doctor looked up from the console with a surprised expression on his face. 'Actually no, I wanted to tell you Jason is guilty and upset about not living up to your expectations of him as a husband and father, and that you should try to understand and forgive him.' He thought for a moment,then looked even more surprised. 'But I suppose it works both ways.' He beamed. 'Actually, that's quite clever. Did you see where I put the soldering iron?'

'In the toolbox.'

'Ah. Thanks.'

A thought occurred to me. 'How did you know I'm -'

He looked up. 'Are you?'

I thought about my reply very carefully. 'So what's the matter with the TARDIS?'

He shrugged. 'Long story. Had to adjust the dimensional stabilizer so Chris could fly Sven's chopper in through the doors to avoid a nuclear explosion.

Thing is, the chopper was infected with Agent Yellow. I thought I'd deleted the infected area, but apparently I missed a bit.'

'Missed a bit?'

'Mmm, that's right.' The Doctor chewed thoughtfully on the soldering iron, yelped, flipped it over, stuck it back in his mouth and chewed again. 'Either that or. . .' He thumped the console suddenly. :Thhuh uhhh!' He spat out the soldering iron, caught it in mid air and flipped it back into the toolkit.

'That's it! Jason and Chris were infected, but they're still alive? They must be carriers.'

'Is he - I mean, are they going to die?'

'Probably not. But you never can tell. But even if they don't die, they'll just spread the infection everywhere they go. Unless they live the rest of their lives in a force field.' The Doctor looked at me suddenly. 'How exactly did Jason "go"?'

'He took my ring.'

'He touched you?'

'I suppose so. I -' I stopped.

The Doctor said grimly, 'If he is a carrier and he's infected the TARDIS, then . . .'

It didn't take a genius to finish his thought. 'Everyone here is infected as well.'

I was about to get really nasty when Chris bounced into the TARDIS and said, 'Hi. The umbrella's working fine. I've disarmed the warheads.'

I frowned. 'Talk about losing a shilling and finding sixpence.'

Chris framed a reply and was about to speak when the door opened again.

Jason was standing there. He looked gaunt, shocked, for all the world on the verge of a breakdown. My heart leapt out for him but somehow I just couldn't move.

He said, 'Has anyone got any food? I haven't eaten in a thousand years.'

My sympathy vanished almost immediately.

The Doctor said, 'Gentlemen, brace yourselves. I have some bad news ...

and I have some bad news. Which do you want first?'

The Doctor went through it all one more time for Chris and Jason. At the end of it Chris looked faintly puzzled. 'There was something Roz said ... in the helicopter ... I can't quite ...'

Jason added, far too importantly, I thought, 'I was serious about that food.

You've no idea what I've been through.'

The fact that both of them seemed for a moment incapable of addressing the real problem - or even of being aware that they were the problem - just made me see red. Of course I picked on Jason.

'You're hungry, are you? Oh dear. Such a shame. Have you listened to a word the Doctor said?'

'I know, I know! I've just been -

'What? Been for a little pleasure jaunt through time? Did you have fun? Did you even for one moment think what you might be doing? What the results of your actions might be?'

Jason bit his lip. 'Of course not, not at first, but afterwards. That's when I realized -

'Naturally!' My voice was an angry yell. 'You always realize how you've messed it up afterwards! What on Earth did you think you were doing?'

'Actually I was trying to save the Earth.'

'Oh great. Very clever. Save the Earth by inducing a paradox.' Peripherally I was aware that the Doctor and Chris were both staring open-mouthed at us. Well, Chris was staring at us, his head swivelling back and forth like a spectator at a tennis match. The Doctor was simply staring at Jason. Or rather his shoes. 'If you hadn't done anything, everything would be all right!'

Jason blinked in confusion. 'But you're the one who said I never do do anything,' he babbled. 'I only did what you said I didn't!'

'Jason, sometimes you can be such a drone.'

'I don't get it, Benny. I did it for you. I did it for all those people on Earth.

And you hate me for it.'

The Doctor pulled a magnifying glass from his pocket. He knelt beside my husband and began to examine his shoes. For some reason I found this irrelevant behaviour intensely annoying. 'You did it for yourself. You always do. And I don't hate you.'

By now Jason was annoyed too. His voice was cracked, tense, weary, but the anger in it was building towards bitterness. 'Of course you do. And I know why. I was stealing your thunder.'

'What?!' My voice was an incredulous squeak.

'Yeah. If you or the Doctor had done what I had done it would've been fine!'

I found my gaze drawn to the Doctor. He had now produced a pair of tweezers, had lifted one of Jason's feet as if he were shoeing a horse and was scraping the sole. 'You idiot! The reason the Doctor and I did nothing was because it was obvious there was nothing we could do! Time is linear, Jason. The Astronomer Royal is dead, his world destroyed, his species extinct. And Earth is in terrible danger. You can't just make that not have happened.'

Jason's voice was quiet. 'I know.'

'And yet you still went back. That's why all this happened! You went back to change it but all you did was make it all happen in the first place!'

'I didn't mean to.'

'Doesn't make any difference. It's still your fault.'

'That's totally unfair.'

I responded to the anger in his voice with more anger of my own. 'Life is unfair, Jason. It's unfair when your relationship breaks down. It's unfair when your husband is irresponsible. It's unfair when an alien terraforming installation decides to mess up your planet!'

'I can't handle this.' Jason turned away abruptly, leaving the Doctor clutching his magnifying glass and tweezers, and some bits of what looked like organic matter, which he dropped hastily into a test tube. 'I just can't handle this. I'm tired. I'm hungry. I've just seen a civilization die. I need - I just - I have to - oh I don't know what I want. But it isn't this!'

'Well you know what you can do then!'

Abruptly he turned back. 'Are you saying you want me to leave?'

'Are you saying you want to leave?' I snapped back. 'I don't know!'

'Well, I don't know either! Though I'm starting to get a bloody good idea.'

The Doctor stood up, held the test tube containing the organic matter up to the light and swished it around thoughtfully. 'You know . . .' He operated some controls and a section of wall irised open to reveal a bank of what looked like medical instruments, a computer, a shelf of very old books and a large brass and mahogany microscope. 'I'm starting to get an idea too.'

'What?' I asked him.

Before he could answer there came the sound of shouting from outside the TARDIS.

Chris said, 'Looks like they found Tammuz. I'd better go and help?'

I followed Chris to the door. Jason looked like he was about to follow me when the Doctor beckoned him quietly and he stayed.

I followed Chris out of the TARDIS - and into an eightway Mexican standoff.

The soldiers had Tammuz surrounded. The commotion was being caused by Dilaver's uncle. He had a gun. God knows where he got it. He was pointing the gun at Tammuz and screaming in Arabic. Dilaver's aunt was yelling too. Some of the soldiers had their guns pointing at Dilaver's uncle.

Some at Tammuz. Tammuz himself also had a gun - not only that but he had the gun pointing at the head of a soldier, who was on his knees in front of Tammuz. In total there were eight guns. I couldn't work out quite who had the drop on whom, but everyone was yelling for someone else to put their guns down while waving their own about madly. The villagers had clustered in a knot behind Dilaver's uncle. They brandished whatever they carried aggressively. Some held shovels or hammers. Where on Earth had they got all these tools from? Surely the Doctor hadn't let them on board armed to the teeth?

What the heck. I had no time to worry about that now. I moved closer while Chris circled around the crowd. When he saw me approach, Tammuz clicked back the hammer on his gun. The soldier he was holding by the throat remained absolutely motionless. 'Tell them to put down their guns.'

'Now you know I can't do that.'

'Do it or he dies!'

'If you shoot him, they'll shoot you.'

Dilaver's uncle screamed something in Arabic and pushed forward with his own gun. The soldiers nearest him moved to stop him. He waved the gun at them. Their own guns moved to cover him.

I sighed. Someone was going to die here. Unless I did something. Then a thought occurred to me. I walked towards Tammuz. 'Put down the gun.'

'No! Stay back!'

'Put it down!'

Tammuz moved his gun to point at me. Gritting my teeth, I kept on walking.

The gun came up. 'Put it down.'

'Don't come any closer!'

'Put it down.'

Tammuz backed away. I could see Chris behind him now. Tammuz had missed that move. Good. Together we might have a chance.

I took another step. 'Give me the gun.'

'No.'

'Give it to me.'

'No! Get back, I said!'

'Give me the -

'Benny, what the hell do you think you're doing?' Jason. I whirled. The idiot was running full tilt towards me. 'Everyone stop it right now! The Doctor thinks he's found a way to -

Something roared behind me. Jason bent double, spun, fell to the ground.

Tammuz. Tammuz had -

I turned. The soldiers were firing. Tammuz was going down. He squeezed the trigger. The automatic fired. About a hundred rounds sprayed the nearest soldiers and members of the crowd. They fell, slow motion. I felt something punch me repeatedly in the chest and arms. Bullets. I'd been, shot. I went numb. I couldn't breathe. I fell.

I rolled. I skidded to a halt, groaned, fought for breath. I struggled to my feet. Staggered up to where Tammuz was being held down by a number of villagers. More villagers and some soldiers were holding back Dilaver's uncle. I stood over Tammuz and caught my breath.

'You should know better than to try to shoot someone protected by a force field,' I gasped. I picked up his fallen automatic and pressed it slowly against his stomach. My own force field extended to cover the gun, meshed with Tammuz's field and, in the same way that Jason had been able to steal my ring, I poked Tammuz hard in the gut with his own gun. 'I'm making a point,' I said. 'Are we learning anything here today?'

Tammuz scowled. He stopped struggling.

I handed the gun to a soldier and turned to help Jason back to his feet. I started to say something, then just gave it up. I was too tired and I

hurt too much. Dilaver's uncle caught my eye. I turned to him. I held out my hand for his gun. He gave it up without a word and turned away to be comforted by his wife and the rest of the villagers.

I sat down against the side of the TARDIS. Something inside was telling me to just sit there until whatever infection Jason had given me by touching me took effect and I melted into a steaming puddle. I tried to ignore the voice.

But it would be so easy just to sit there and do nothing. Think nothing. I was tired, bruised, my chest and arm were killing me. I was in bad shape all round.

Jason mooched over and sat down beside me. 'Great. Just what I need.'

'Hi, yourself?'

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'Fine.'

'I just thought ... you know ... that I'd tell you about the antivirus the Doctor has just made.'

I sat up. 'Antivirus?

'Yeah, parrot. Antivirus.' By now Jason's grin was irritating. Did the man know no humility? 'The antivirus he made from Cthalctose biomatter bonded to the force field around my shoe.'

'He made an antivirus from something he scraped off your shoe?'

'Yep. Great, huh?'

I sighed. 'Jason, I'm this close to a total breakdown. I've been shot at, knocked out, depressurized, and otherwise nearly lost my life on any number of occasions. I do not - read my lips - do not need cheering up.'

Jason didn't have time to look hurt before the Doctor poked his head around the side of the TARDIS and said, 'It's mopping up Agent Yellow in the TARDIS like a sponge. I think we're ready to try it out on the Earth now.

Do you want to help?'

Jason bounced to his feet. 'You bet!' He helped me to my feet. I was so knackered I let him. The Doctor handed Jason a huge plastic bucket shaped like a castle turret with the words BRIGHTON BEACH embossed on the side. Instead of sand the bucket was filled to the brim with a reddish-brown dust. 'Think you can find the transmission chamber?'

Jason grinned. 'If Benny can find it, I can.' It was a stupid joke. I didn't smile.

The Doctor said, 'Just put the bucket in the chamber, get out and seal the door. I'll do the rest from here.'

Jason took the bucket and walked away. The Doctor now beckoned to Chris and handed him a medical kit?

'Inoculations?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Administer this to everyone. Including yourself, Jason and Bernice?'

Chris nodded. I took my injection in the only limb that was currently pain free, then followed as the Doctor led me towards the operations centre.

I said, rubbing my arm, 'Tell me about this antivirus, Doctor.'

He grinned. 'Couldn't be simpler. As soon as I realized there was biological matter bonded to Jason's force field I realized I might be able to synthesize an agent which would inhibit the function of Agent Yellow. Perhaps even kill it altogether.'

'And you think you've found that?'

'Oh yes. No question of it. I've tested Agent Scarlet inside the TARDIS and so far it has performed admirably.'

'A veritable Domestos of alien viruses?'

'Indeed.'

'In laboratory conditions..'

'Well. Ye-es, but I'm sure it will work in the field.'

I remembered Chris offering me the injection. 'So sure you've had Chris inoculate everyone here.'

'You have to start somewhere?'

'And how do you hope to deliver this Captain scarlet to the sites of infection?'

The Doctor winked. 'We'll use the same delivery system that put Agent Yellow there.'

'Oh. Fine. Well, in that case do you mind if I have a little sit down? I'm feeling a bit tired.'

The Doctor looked disappointed, for all the world like a little boy who has offered to show you his beetle collection and then been told the sight of insects makes you sick. 'Don't you want to watch?'

'I suppose so.'

'Excellent!' The pleasure in the Doctor's voice was doubled when he saw that Jason had returned from the transmission chamber. Chris and the villagers crowded round, some rubbing their arms. A dog barked. Chickens strutted. The sheep made that unnerving sheep noise.

We reached the hexagonal console that reminded me so much of the one in the TARDIS. Well, now I knew why. Jason; the force-field emitters he'd given the Astronomer Royal on Cthalctose, over six billion years ago.

The Doctor wandered around the console. He seemed deep in thought. He paced and muttered. He frowned. He counted on his fingers, carried a few numbers on to his elbows, got confused, then sighed and started again.

Finally, he operated some controls, looked up at the machine hovering overhead and grinned.

A familiar voice said, 'Attention. This is the personality matrix of the Astronomer Royal. You are now about to see something really clever.'

The Doctor mouthed the words in time with the sonorous voice.

I had to chuckle.

The machine unfolded and Earth fell out.

It was a sick world we were looking at.

Turkey was gone, obscured by a cloud of roiling yellow. The Sahara was gone. A lot of Asia was gone. Africa and

Europe were in a bad way. The Black Sea was now principally composed of acid and was enlarging its own basin, albeit very slowly, in conjunction with numerous earthquakes. The Alps were falling down; already they had lost several thousand feet.

The Earth moved around us.

Hot spots were appearing throughout the rest of the world. North America had five or six, South America between Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires was a mess. In Siberia there were hot spots dotted along the Urals. Tibet seemed clear, protected by the huge bulk of the Himalayas. That couldn't last. The western slopes were already on the move, shuddering groundwards in gigantic earthquakes. Only Australia seemed completely clear of infection. About that I had mixed feelings. I had never liked sheep, but kangaroos were cute.

The atmosphere writhed with Agent Yellow. Sullen nuclear suns bloomed briefly but constantly in the yellow vapour, desperate attempts to sterilize infected areas. There were places where, except for the almost familiar land masses, I felt I was looking at an alien planet. .

Nobody said anything? Even the sheep were quiet.

I was just glad the view wasn't detailed enough to show what was happening to the people.

The Doctor checked Jason had placed the bucket correctly in the transmission chamber, then told the Ark to upload Agent Scarlet and target the main sites of infection.

The Ark did as it was told.

I felt a fluttery sensation in my chest. Would it work? That damn cynic inside told me everything was going too smoothly. That something was going to go wrong.

It was right, of course.

The Ark dumped Agent Scarlet into the principal sites of infection.

We waited. Nothing. We waited some more. Still nothing. Then again, what was I looking for? A sudden change from yellow to red indicating everything was OK? A tasty CGI effect over in a few seconds which would indicate the infection was dead, the Earth saved? I shook my head. This was a planet.

A whole planet. It might take hours, even days to see the change.

Meanwhile Agent Yellow continued to spread. The Doctor muttered, operated another set of controls, told the Ark to target other areas.

Still nothing. The villagers and soldiers stood around and watched. The animals got underfoot. Some began to complain they were hungry. Some asked where the toilet was. One asked how to pee through his force field.

Still Agent Yellow continued to spread. Another hour passed.

'Doctor, what -?'

I placed my finger on Jason's lips. He shut up.

Finally the Doctor looked up, his boyish delight replaced by a terrible realization. 'I don't understand. It should have worked. It should have - He suddenly slumped, rubbing his eyes tiredly. 'Of course. I should have guessed. It's the bombs. The bombs they're using to try to sterilize the infected areas. The radiation is killing Agent Scarlet before it can take hold.'

He shook his head, operated a few controls, examined a few read-outs.

The Earth spun around us, bringing new sites of infection into view every few seconds. 'There are a few places where Agent Scarlet is established.

But not enough to affect the broad flow of Agent Yellow. I've . . . no. I'm wrong. It's not just the radiation. It's ...

The Doctor suddenly left the console and moved towards the TARDIS. We only had to part the screens to see what it was he'd realized. The TARDIS

did not look any better. If anything the infection on its outer shell was spreading. The Doctor stopped short, shaking his head sadly. 'It wasn't right. The formula. Something was missing. Something I missed. A codon set. Part of the viral DNA sequence. Something . . .'

Jason said quietly, 'If only we had a sample of the antivirus that Liz was working on.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Perhaps a combination of Liz's thinking and mine would produce a solution ... it always worked in the past . . .' He seemed lost in thought, a strange, half fearful look on his face. As if he had lost something precious to him. Liz? His pride?

I said, 'But we don't have Liz's formula, do we? We don't even have a sample?'

Jason bit his lip. 'Imorkal tried to put the formula into my head. I didn't get anything though. It was too - I was too scared.'

The Doctor nodded. 'The race memory. Genetic fear. It'll be centuries before Human and Earth Reptile can work together productively.' He sighed. 'This solution is not going to work. Agent Scarlet has failed. Unless we can think of something else, I'm very much afraid the Astronomer Royal is going to get his new world after all.'

I didn't quite know how to respond to that. Before I could decide, one of the villagers began to shout. Others clustered around him. He was beating frantically at his arm. We ran over. By the time we got there it was obvious what was happening. The infection spread to everyone by Jason had finally taken hold. True it had been slowed by the various agents Liz and the Doctor had used against it - but it was tough, it was mutating, and it was still killing.

It killed the villager as we watched; killed him slowly and painfully. It took an hour. By the time he died others were beginning to show signs of infection too. It was during the last few minutes of his death that my own skin began to itch, and then to burn. But it wasn't until I stared down at the puddle of acid sloshing around inside the man-shaped force field that I realized the Doctor's inoculations had failed.

We were all going to die.

Chapter 12

I was watching the Doctor when the villager died. He seemed to collapse inwards as if failure had sucked the very life out of him. I felt a brief moment of pleasure - I was right and Benny was wrong: we hadn't needed him -

then the feeling vanished. And to be honest I was glad. I knew that sometimes I behaved like a complete git - and that's a hard thing to admit to, let alone accept. But recently something had changed inside. I wondered if it Was the knowledge that 'I might be a parent --or the thousand years I had spent in stasis, teetering on the knife edge between madness and self understanding. Somehow being away from the situation here on the Moon, and on Earth, for so long had distanced me from it. I no longer felt driven by the immediacy of the threat. I didn't know why. Nothing had changed for the better. If anything, things were much worse. And yet I couldn't find it within myself to be involved any more. I thought back to my seemingly endless arguments with Benny. How much they had hurt. How close to the truth we might both have been and how unwilling either of us had been to acknowledge the other's point of view.

Had I become an emotional burnout, or had I grown up a bit in the last thousand years?

Now there was a question that was going to be on my mind for a while.

Longer than it would occupy the minds of those dying around me, anyway. I shot a look at Bernice. She was ignoring me. I decided to indulge her. She obviously had enough to worry about.

The Doctor looked up suddenly. He seemed to straighten imperceptibly, as if the weight of his responsibility had fallen' from him for a moment. 'Jason, tell me again what you saw in your last years on Cthalctose.'

I shrugged. He'd already heard the story once. Would telling the story again make any significant difference? 'Well, after they got the force field technology sussed, it took them a while to put it to any kind of sensible use.

They sent ships out to the region of the singularity, nosed around. They found the wreckage of the outer part of their system and a

cluster of pinhead black holes - I think it was those that gave them the idea of restarting their Ark project, in the end.'

'They used the force fields to capture the pinhead black holes?'

'Yes. Well, two anyway. They put them in a special chamber inside the Moon and orbited them around one another. The singularities would feed off the Moon's mass, and this would provide a very long-lived source of energy for the Ark.' I looked around, wondering how many of the soldiers and villagers realized all this was my fault. 'After that, it was fairly straightforward. They designed the systems and then waited for -'

The Doctor nodded impatiently. 'Thank you, Jason.'

I shrugged. 'Glad to be of help.' If I had been of help I had no idea how.

Bernice asked the Doctor quietly: 'Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?'

Instead of answering her question, the Doctor looked at Chris. 'You remember those nuclear bombs you just disarmed?'

Chris nodded. 'Yes.'

'I want you to arm them again.' Chris blinked. 'But Roz said-'

The Doctor cut him off impatiently. 'We've no time for discussion, Chris. In a matter of ten or twelve hours Agent Yellow will have spread so far there'll be no one to save. So we've got no time to waste.'

Bernice cleared her throat. I noticed she was rubbing her arm, 'Doctor?

You are thinking what I think you're thinking, aren't you?'

The Doctor said quietly, 'EMP It's the only way.'

'The only way to what?' I asked.

'To crash the Ark's control systems and liberate the singularities.'

I felt cold. 'Destroying the Ark won't stop what's happening on Earth.'

Bernice looked at me with hollow eyes. 'That's not the point.'

Chris said, 'They'll destroy the Moon. The burst of X-rays will sterilize the Earth. Kill everything. But that'll take months to happen. We'll all be dead by then, and so will terrestrial life.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I know a thing or two about singularities. My people learnt to use them as tools, a long time ago.'

Bernice said, 'You can't do it.'

The Doctor said, 'I can't not do it.'

Bernice scowled. 'It's cutting off your damn nose to spite your face,' she said angrily.

The Doctor said, with terrible finality, 'It's cutting off your face to save your life.'

I said, 'Will someone please tell me what you're talking about?'

Benny said bleakly, 'He's going to liberate the singularities that power the Ark. Orbit them through the Earth. The X-ray bursts at ground level will sterilize the sites of infection.'

Even I understood that. 'But that will kill everything in the infected areas.

People. Animals. Everything.' I glanced around at the projection of the Earth. 'That's ... millions of people.'

The Doctor looked at me with infinite sadness. 'I know it's hard to accept, Jason. But it's the only way to save your world - and the billions living on it -

from complete annihilation.'

There was nothing I could say to that.

Chris nodded thoughtfully and loped away towards the tunnel which led to the lunar surface.

Bernice shot me a peculiar look, then followed Chris.

I found myself thinking about that look long after the Doctor had returned, almost in a daze, to the TARDIS. What did it mean? Was she angry? Did I do something wrong again? She could hardly blame me for what had happened to the people here and on Earth. Could she?

I sighed. Suddenly I felt an overwhelming wave of depression. All around me people were dying horribly, slowly. It was my fault. Whether it was fair of Bernice to blame me or not was almost irrelevant. I sighed. I paced. I hummed and hawed. In the end there was one thing I could do. I could apologize for being such a jerkoff.

I set off up the tunnel to the surface. Only later did it occur to me to wonder when the last time I had seen Tammuz was, and where he might be now.

Ten minutes and half a mile outside the tunnel entrance I found out.

He was standing a few metres from the little trestle table holding Chris's computer and the Doctor's inverted umbrella.

Bernice was on her knees in front of Tammuz, who had one arm around her neck to immobilize her. With his other hand, Tammuz held a pistol firmly to the side of her head. I could see their force fields had melded. If Tammuz pulled the trigger now, Bernice would surely die.

I didn't know what to do. I just stood there out on the stark lunar plain, my back to a range of low hills, the Earth high and full in the sky, a sickly yellow orb. Beside me a lunar rover waited for technicians it would now never carry to and from Tranquillity Base.

Tammuz said, 'Mister Cwej. You will be so kind as to step away from the computer.'

Chris hesitated.

Bernice said, with more spirit than sense, I felt, 'If those bombs aren't armed you can kiss the Earth goodbye.'

'You think I will not recognize a lie when I hear one?' Tammuz tightened his hold on Bernice, pressing the gun against her face until she gasped. ' "I'm making a point?"' Bernice cringed as he quoted her own words right back at her. ' "Are we learning anything here today?" '

Bernice was quiet. Chris hadn't moved. I wondered if I could get around behind Tammuz, perhaps pull him off Bernice before he could fire. I didn't get the chance.

'Ah. Mister Kane. Good of you to join us. If you will be kind enough to explain to Mister Cwej why he should not destroy the stocks of

weapons which the Americans obviously have hidden here I will refrain from killing your lovely wife?'

I hesitated. 'Bernice -'

She said, 'Jason, shut up. Chris. You know the score. He can't shoot you.

I'm dying anyway. The Earth has no chance if you don't arm those bombs.'

Still Chris didn't move. He seemed to be listening, but to what, I had no idea.

Bernice said, 'Jason, he's set the program, just hit -' Tammuz pushed Bernice with the barrel of his gun. Things seemed to happen with dreamlike slowness. Bernice began to fall. At the same time Chris jumped at Tammuz. Tammuz, his finger closing reflexively on the trigger of the gun, jerked away from Chris in an automatic reaction. The movement brought the gun out of Bernice's force field. The gun discharged.

Bernice fell over. Chris stopped.

For a second Tammuz didn't move. Then Bernice tangled her legs around his and he was falling. 'Jason,' she screamed, 'the computer!' Tammuz grabbed her, his hands slipping across her force field. The fields opened. I saw him groping for the emitter control strapped to her wrist. If he reached it and switched it off, or took it off her -

I moved then. Faster than I would have thought possible, covering the ground in long strides.

Her voice was a scream in my ears. 'Leave me, you idiot! Get to the computer!'

She delivered a right hook to Tammuz that had him sprawling across the lunar surface. Clouds of dust rose and immediately began to settle. For a moment I lost sight of the struggling figures.

'Chris!' I yelled. 'Help her!'

Chris didn't move. Dust swirled around his feet. 'Sorry,' he said quietly,

'what was that you said, Roz?

I charged past Chris and into the cloud of lunar dust. I grabbed the first person I felt and pulled hard. It was Tammuz.

'Get your goddamn hands off my wife, don't you know she's having a baby!!!' I screamed.

Then I lifted Tammuz over my head and threw him as hard and as far as I could in the low gravity.

He whirled through the air, arms and legs flailing, hit the side of the lunar rover and slid down it to the ground. He didn't move.

I helped Bernice up. She clutched me, then collapsed. I saw with horror that the skin of her hands and neck was reddening with far more than just bruises 'Jason,' she gasped. I winced at the pain in her voice. 'The computer! Hit space bar! Arm the bombs!'

I hesitated. Bernice was dying. It was my fault. 'Jason!' Her voice was an agonized scream in my ears. Obeying her voice, I moved quickly to the computer. The program was set. Bernice was right. All I had to do was hit a key and the program would upload to the missiles currently approaching us. The warheads would arm. And then ...

I reached out for the key. I blinked. For a moment I saw not a keyboard, but a television. Not the lunar wastes but a suburban living room.

I rested my finger on the space bar.

I looked at Bernice, but I didn't see her. I saw a father hitting a son, hitting and then blaming the son for weakness. I looked at Chris, motionless in the settling dust, but I didn't see him. I saw a woman deliberately ignore her son's pleas for help. In quick succession, I saw a boy run from his own family, I saw innocence die, watched bitter violence and lies grow in its place. I saw pain and fear in the boy's face, saw him running, running from something he couldn't change and blaming himself for being unable to change it. And later, years later, I saw the guilt, the self-hatred, the wasted opportunities, the wasted life.

This wasn't new to me. I had seen it all before, on a vast canvas: the world of Cthalctose, the span of a thousand years. The ignorance, the violence, the emotional sterility, the self-denial, the wasted lives.

Except their lives hadn't been wasted. Because they had built their Ark.

The Ark that was their future. They had a future. That was something I hadn't seen much less understood, until now.

They had a future. So did I. There was hope.

Except that if I pushed the space bar and armed the bombs there would be no hope for the Cthalctose. Their power supply would be used to save the Earth and they would never get a second chance at life.

By ensuring my own future, I would sacrifice theirs. I couldn't do it.

I had to do it.

I hesitated, touching the space bar? Bernice was screaming at me. I had to decide? I couldn't decide. My world, their world, no world.

Bernice was dying. Earth was dying. Would it make one jot of difference what I did?

Make a decision. That's what Bernice had told me? Take responsibility for your actions.

I thought of Bernice, her smile, her tear-filled eyes as we made love, of the rollercoaster ride we had taken at Brighton, the view of Paris from the Eiffel Tower, the way it swayed as the wind caught it, the laughter in her eyes, the wind in her hair, the bad jokes, the smell of her, the feel of her holding me, touching me; slowly becoming part of me.

'Jason.' Her voice was a painful whisper. 'Don't do it for me. Do it for us. All of us.'

Her words made me think of her condition. If the bombs were armed then the Earth had a chance. We had a chance. At best we would find a cure. At worst we would die together in a flash of heat and light so intense that we wouldn't even know it had happened.

I made my mind up.

I pushed the space bar.

Nothing happened, of course. Not here. Not where I could see it or touch it.

What happened, happened a thousand miles and several minutes away, in the arming mechanisms of two three-hundred-megaton nuclear warheads. I stood quite still. In the upper right-hand comer of

the laptop screen a number was flicking steadily downwards.

Fifteen minutes until detonation.

I had experienced one nuclear explosion; one was one too many. I didn't want to come anywhere near another. Time to get back to the TARDIS. I moved to Bernice. She was lying on the ground? She was shaking. Her quiet moans of pain were heart-wrenching. How long did she have?

Minutes? An hour? More? Less?

I knelt beside her. I didn't even dare touch her for fear of inflicting more pain.

She whispered something. 'Sorry, love?'

'Said ... I'm sorry . . .'

'Ssshh. It's not your fault.'

'Listen ... me ... going to ... die ... you know it ... I know it . . .' She lifted her arm. I tried to take her hand. She avoided my grasp, positioning her -arm so I could see her force-field emitter. 'Make it quick for me, Jason.'

'Bernice!'

'Don't make me beg you.'

'Benny, I can't do that. What about -?'

Bernice managed a terrible chuckle. 'Don't worry. You'll only be killing one of us.'

I blinked stupidly. 'I thought -'

'So did I ... found out while you were away I was . . . wrong ... tension ... I guess. Worry. It can happen. I'm so sorry. I love you.'

'I love you too. How did you -?'

Now she was coughing, her voice cracked. 'Coming on in a spacesuit is no fun, I can tell you.' She made a strangled noise. 'Oh God, it hurts when I ...

laugh.' She coughed. 'Actually ... hurts all the damn time.'

My cheeks began to burn. I realized I was crying. She reached up and held me. Dying as she was, she held me. '. . . you crying for us ... or...'

'No,' I said with more anger than I realized. 'For. . .you know.'

'I'm sorry ... had to get you to ... arm the ... bombs.' Now anger swelled inside. I tried to suppress it. I couldn't. I hadn't grown up that much: The anger was a balm. It allowed me not to think about what was going to happen to us. To her.

She settled against me, gasped with pain. 'How long?'

I looked at the computer. 'A few minutes. Long enough to get you back to the TARDIS.'

'No. If you can't help me ... you leave me. You go. Now, Jason. Please.

Just do as I say this once. For me. Please. Please, Jason. Go.'

'I can't leave you.' 'You must.'

'I can't!'

'Then you ... know the other choice.'

I put my hand over hers, felt the force fields part to allow us to touch. 'I know.' I put my hand on hers. The sting of acid made me cry out. She moved her arm until my hand was resting on the force-field emitter.

'Please.'

'I love you.' 'It hurts.' 'I know.' 'Please.'

I remembered-something then, something I once heard but never understood. We never realize what we have until it's gone.

What a lesson to learn. What a way to learn it, a quarter of a million miles from the world of my birth, holding the woman I loved and trying to prepare myself to end her life.

Tears coursing down my face, I groped for the control which would shut down the force field and allow Bernice to die quickly by suffocation, instead of by suffering the lingering death I had inflicted upon her.

As I touched the control, a hand gripped my arm. Chris. I looked up,

saw the big lunk through a rippling veil of tears. 'You don't understand. I have to.

I have to. It's what she. It's what. It's -

'No.' Chris's voice was suddenly very firm. He pulled my hand away from Bernice. 'Roz told me. In the helicopter. Roz told me.'

'Told you what, for God's sake!'

Chris smiled. It was the smile of an Angel. 'AG,' he said. 'CT. CT. AG. AT.

ACG. TTCT. TCAGC. CT. CT. There's more. I've got a good memory.'

I gaped. 'What the hell are you =

Bernice tugged my arm. 'Base pairs. Codon sets. Alien codon sets. It's a gene map for a virus. It's the cure, Jason. Chris knows the cure!'

I gaped.

In the helicopter. Roz told me. Imorkal.

Humans and Earth Reptiles won't be able to work together for centuries.

Chris was from the twenty-ninth century.

I had just been the backup. The one that failed. Imorkal had telepathically planted the gene sequence for Liz's antivirus in Chris's mind!

I glanced at the laptop as Chris scooped Bernice into his arms. 'Sorry, Benny. Might hurt a bit. Not for long though?' I thought I heard her whisper,

'You big lunk,' as we turned towards the tunnel entrance to the Ark, a quarter of a mile away.

I was too busy looking at the computer screen. The clock read 00:00:30.

'Chris? We have to get her to the LRV Now!' But the rover was gone.

Tammuz had taken it? We had run out of time.

'Burt the Turtle says, "Duck and cover,"' Bernice whispered. She collapsed.

00:00:00.

The sky turned white.

I expected to die. Of course I did. I was blind for some time, though the force field saved my sight as well as my life. The most horrible part was not being able to move? It brought back memories of my incarceration on Cthalctose. I'm afraid I did panic, rather? Still, being trapped in a plain of radioactive glass will have that effect, I suppose.

We were all there, Chris, Bernice and myself. Flies in amber. After my sight came back I could see perfectly well. We were only inches below the surface. It was enough to keep us motionless, paralysed. About half a mile away I could make out a dark, irregular shape in the glass. The LRV

I couldn't see Tammuz, but I knew he was in that half melted tin can. I could hear him. He was talking to himself. At times he would shout, at others scream, at still others, his voice would subside to a childlike muttering and he would pray.

A long time after my sight came back I felt the ground shudder. The glass cracked around us. Aftershocks? I thought not. I thought it was probably something far more horrible.

Something about the size of a grain of sand which weighed considerably more than the average star.

Two somethings, in fact. I was right.

The singularities were free.

Shortly after I came to this realization, Tammuz began to scream. The screams didn't last long. They didn't so much stop as drop sharply in pitch, as if Tammuz was being sucked away through a long tunnel at a speed no human body could withstand.

I wondered what it felt like to be crushed out of existence by a singularity, to be ripped apart by tidal forces and smeared out around an event horizon no bigger than the end of a biro.

I lay there and waited to die.

Above me I saw the Earth erupt with flashes of silver, like. cleansing fire in the sickly yellow pus that was its atmosphere.

After a while Bernice woke up and started to moan.

I listened to her cries of pain and waited for the Doctor to come rescue us.

At times I felt like crying myself, but I was all out of tears.

***

Epilogue

I suppose it's fairly obvious what happened next.

The combination of Liz's codon sets and the Doctor's genetic material resulted in an almost perfect antivirus. The pity of it was that there was simply no time to fast breed enough to bombard the infected areas before the growth of Agent Yellow became unstoppable. I suppose we were lucky that the Doctor's own antivirus had stabilized the damage to the TARDIS

just enough to allow him to control the singularities in their orbits through the Earth.

For my own part I think of that time, imprisoned in the 'bomb crater surrounding the Ark and I wonder if I would have got through it had Jason not been there with me. Not that I was there very long. But when you're turning into a puddle of hydrochloric acid, while watching a tenth of all life on your home planet be wiped out by X-ray bursts from pinhead singularities, life can seem terribly unfair.

Nobody else who was with us on the Moon died. The Doctor inoculated them properly and took them back to Earth, scattering them throughout the population to act as vectors for Agent Scarlet. Even the livestock.

When he told me that I smiled. 'You're telling me a sheep saved the Earth?'

His smile was wistful. 'It was a vector, like the rest, a way to get Agent Scarlet into the food chain. Think of it like mad cow disease in reverse.'

That made me chuckle. God knows I had little enough to chuckle about. I had been scarred both physically and mentally. The physical scarring will heal with grafts and time. The mental scarring ... well I don't know about that.

After marriage it's hard to simply be alone, much less heal.

Jason and I agreed to a divorce on the same plain of radioactive glass in which we had been trapped, beneath an Earth that glimmered like a Christmas tree ornament. Each tiny rainbow sparkle signified the death of thousands. It was a curious affair, solemn, private, with few words spoken.

There were no rows, no screaming, no arguments. Jason symbolized our decision by handing me back the time ring he had stolen from me. He also decided to stay on Earth. 'I'm not my father,' he said. 'I don't run away from my responsibilities. At least not any more?'

I thought of the world he had made. That world had taken a hard knock.

There would be millions of people with nowhere to live, no food to eat.

Millions would die. As we stood on that plain of glass, beneath the full Earth, I could see Jason thinking hard about those that would survive.

About how they would eat, where they would live. About how they would live. I knew he had seen one world die from a blow such as this. I could see he did not want to watch another die.

In preceding years movement of people from one area of the Earth to another on this scale had been impossible for many reasons. Now it was essential. I watched the Earth silently, understanding that it was a new world I was seeing emerge from the birth trauma of Agent Yellow. I could see Jason wondering if the people of this new world would learn and grow and live ... or fail to learn, and die.

That was one question I knew the answer to. In broad terms, only, of course, but nonetheless I had an answer of sorts. But then I was from the future and he wasn't.

It was just one more way in which we were different. I left him there to find out what I already knew.

Or thought I knew.

As for the rest of it, nada. Why did we divorce? I have no idea.

Was it because Jason lied to me about loving me, or because I lied to him about my pregnancy? Was it because the Earth survived, or because the Cthalctose died? Was it because I wanted him to kill me, or because he was able to do it?

I didn't even know if I wanted a divorce, or if we should give our relationship another go, thrash it out, try to make some sense out of it. I think I wanted both things at the same time, if you can imagine that. Oh God. It's all so damn complicated.

I asked the Doctor about it later and he was about as unhelpful as I'd ever heard him be.

He said, 'I have walked in Eternity. And Eternity weeps:' I've thought about what he said for years, but I still don't know what he meant.

I shook my head. 'Nah.' I turned once again to enter the TARDIS. As I stepped over the threshold, I tossed the Bible idly onto the lunar surface.

As far as I know it's still there, a lone sentinel in a plain of glass watching over a world that might as well have been made by the hand of God himself.

A thought struck me as I turned away from Jason to enter the TARDIS, and I tilted my head up for one last look at this new world, fresh from its birth pains. I thought about Noah, I thought about the Astronomer Royal. I thought about the death of a world, the birth of another, the transformation which bridged the two.

And the Ark. The Ark that represented a beginning and an ending, both at the same time. I thought about that too. And I took from my pocket a tiny Bible, a doodad Jason had given me while we were on our honeymoon. I think he stole it from a hotel room. I flicked the pages idly, wondering: we had started out looking for one Ark and we found another. Along the way we remade a world. Destiny or coincidence?

I will rain upon the Earth forty days and forty nights; and I will destroy every substance that I have made from the face of the Earth.

I shut the book slowly, thoughtfully. What if...

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Dedication

As well as being in memory of me dear old Dad, this book is also dedicated with special love to my Mum, June Mortimore; and in acknowledgement of selfless courage to Jonathan, Joanne, Andrea, Steve, Eileen, Maureen, Phil, Angela and Andy, Sheila and Bill, Lisa, Wayne, Sam; Cynthia and Stan, Lin and Les, Flossie, Mavis and Bob, Shane and Donna and the staff at St Margaret's, Rita and Pip, Ann, Andy and Mark, Tony, Gwen, Sue, Bob Bone and the Darts Club, Richard Evans of the Royal Liverpool University Hospital, Liz Friend from the Greenwich Support Team, Ron Southard, Chris Paice and Brian Hume, Gina, the Lewisham Direct Team Building Works, the medical staff and radiographers at the Maudsley and St Thomas's, the Marie Curie Nurses, the staff at the Greenwich and Bexley Hospice, and everyone else who was kind enough to offer support to us all when we needed it the most?

If there's ever anything I can do for you guys, you let me know.

Jim Mortimore, September 1996

***

Acknowledgements: Taking Over The Asylum

This year has been, well, mixed. My dad died, one of my best mates might have to be deported, the woman I love was burgled and - well that's enough of that. On the plus side, my garden no longer looks like Ray Bradbury could rent out dinosaur hunts in it, I have sold a couple of bits of music (no you won't like them but check for FEEL on Planet Dog and Phantasm collections) and I got to admire a recorder (you remember that wooden thing you played in the school orchestra when you were six) which stands seven feet high and is as many inches thick. Outstandingly bodacious.

People to whom a mountainous pile of thanks are due: Paul Hinder: To his friends and colleagues he is the Fourth Emergency Service.

Trees: For President Springsteen, Life With The Giblies, and ... well, everything, really.

Lalitha: For stories and music.

Andy: For stress management above and beyond the call of duty.

Stuart: For the sheep story I couldn't use.

Timbo & Kurt: For Simpson Family Therapy, Fear of Flying and Buttzilla.

Congratulations to Joanne and Gareth on your engagement. Nice one, guys.

You may have noticed that there is no Doctor Who logo on the cover of this book. That's not why the Doctor hardly appears in the text though. It's more to do with the way a plot which seems as tight as a gerbil's ... grasp on its food ... can seem, when written as prose, to be as loose as a gerbil's ...

grasp of molecular biology. So if you feel inclined, blame Virgin for the lack of a logo, and me for the lack of a Doctor.

A Serious Message

I need your help. As you know I have worked in the band mammal. This band kicks ass. It is the creation of Nakula Somala. Nakula has also been responsible for several of the characters and situations which have appeared in novels I have written. There are now a number of other musical and writing projects on the go which will never see the light of day unless YOU write a short note to me care of. 27 Colston Rd, Easton, Bristol, BS5 6AA, or via Paul Hinder's internet address: (100773.3554@compuserve.com). The-note should be a variation of the type: 'Dear Sir/Madam. I am writing in support of Nakula Somala's application to remain resident in this country. I have read Jim Mortimore's work and understand that Nakula has in part been responsible for scenes I have enjoyed. I support Jim and Nakula's desire to work more fully together in the future and therefore support Nakula's application to remain resident in this country.' This is not a gag. This is serious. Please help. Every letter counts. Write now.

To demonstrate my thanks, I will send anyone who helps out with a letter for Nakula a copy of the original plot synopsis for this book (and it's wildly different, believe me) or a tape of our latest musical collaboration (including those tracks mentioned above). You choose. It won't even cost you an SAE.

And so I leave you with the wisdom of Burt the Turtle. He knows what to do in the case of a nuclear explosion: Duck and Cover!

Enjoy the picnic.

Outtahere - Jimbo

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